

Dark Matter

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Dark Matter

by [inatshej](#)

Summary

Stiles has learned three things during three days at the Three Oceans Werewolf Conference:

1. He can't heterosexually sleep in the same bed as Derek.
2. Derek is still very hot even when he's feral.
3. Peter isn't quite as irresistible as he believes himself to be, even if the majority of the werewolves wouldn't agree with Stiles on that.

Notes

This is a gift for Kali for Fandom Tramps Hate 2022, who asked for cabin/snowed in fic and feral Derek.

Since I love bad summaries, here's the one for this fic: representation for the win! The werewolf and the witch who want to kill you and your friends are lesbians!

You can find the warnings in the end notes.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

“Hm,” says Peter.

Stiles immediately tenses his grip on the steering wheel. That is never a good sign coming from Peter. It means he’s thinking and his mind is a dark place.

Apparently, Derek believes the same.

“What,” he demands. For some reason, from him it always sounds violent.

“I know Kali,” says Peter.

“You know one of the organizers of the conference,” says Stiles haltingly, trying to calm himself down. “That’s good,” he adds, trying to inflict the power in his statement to make it a good thing. Magic works in unimaginable ways, Deaton says, so why not this one? Please let it be this one.

“Yes, we had a teenage whirlwind of a romance,” says Peter, smiling at the memory. “She was rather cute.”

Stiles tries to imagine teenage Peter and his idea of a cute girl. He has no doubt his face betrays the disgust he feels. “It’s incredible, the way you say completely normal stuff but it’s always horribly too much information.”

“Oh, and there’ll be Alice too,” says Peter, talking over him. “And Jennifer... She’ll lead a workshop you should attend, Stiles: ‘Bridle The Magic and Canter’. Derek, you should go for ‘Better Bitten or Better Born?’. And both of you need to attend the ‘Mating: When Blood Isn’t Enough’.”

“Shut up, Peter,” Derek snaps, his tone laced with the promise of violence.

“What?” Stiles blurts out. “Why would blood be enough for mating? What the hell?”

“It’s a sort of mental shortcut,” explains Derek. “The blood represents physical attraction, scent, and sex.”

“And bite,” adds Peter. Derek glares at him but Peter just smiles back.

“What’s this about the bite?” asks Stiles, suspicious.

“Don’t worry about it,” says Derek.

“I meant the mating bite,” says Peter.

“Mating bite?” Stiles snaps his head to Derek. “So you need to bite me?”

“No,” says Derek and glares at Peter again.

“I’m just trying to be helpful,” says Peter. “Isn’t that why I’m here?”

“We're going to pretend that we're mates, though, right? Because of this weird 'alphas need to have mates' thing?” says Stiles, frowning. “So what's this about a mating bite?”

Derek sighs. “This was a terrible idea,” he says, turning to gaze out of the window.

“It's alright,” says Peter, leaning forward from the backseat. “We'll say that you've only been together for three months so it's understandable that Derek hasn't bitten you yet. Even if he's known for falling fast and hard. Even if it would make sense to bite Stiles before heading off to the Three Oceans Werewolf Conference. Even if...”

“Okay, just bite me, man,” decides Stiles, throwing his hand to the side. “It won't turn me, right?”

“It won't turn you but I'm not biting you while you're driving.”

“Well, I'm not stopping because we're gonna be late, so.” Stiles shakes his wrist right before Derek's face. “Come on, dude.”

“I'm not biting you, Stiles.”

“I consent,” says Stiles.

“I consent,” says Peter.

“I don't,” Derek bites back.

“It has a deep, emotional meaning, doesn't it,” realizes Stiles, drawing his hand back. “Shit, sorry. I'm just nervous, you know? I want this to go well.”

“It doesn't have a deep, emotional meaning,” says Peter. “I've bitten a lot of people. There were moments when-”

“Too much information,” Stiles cuts him off.

“I was so close to biting you as well and-”

“I'm not biting you,” Derek continues over Peter, “because one, you faint at the sight of blood and you're driving. Two, there's no need for that. Three-”

Stiles knows what's coming. He steels himself to hear the words although he has said them himself and it doesn't bother him to hear them from other people. But when Derek mentions their relationship is fake, it always feels like rejection.

“I don't like biting.”

Stiles didn't know what was coming. “You-” Stiles looks at him, thrown. “Well. That's fair.”

There's a brief silence before he remembers Peter's words. “So, you're known for falling hard and fast?”

“That's not true,” says Derek, and glares at Peter again. Stiles has decided to calculate it once and it turned out that Derek's at an average of seven glares at Peter per day. That's one glare every two hours, counting in 8 hours of sleep; Derek is doing really well these days.

“I've never said it was the truth,” replies Peter, his voice light. “I only said what people believe is true. We can use that, actually,” he continues, thoughtful. “Make it sound like you fell in love with Stiles slowly, being friends first. And now you're not in a hurry either as this relationship means so much to you.”

“That's a good idea,” Stiles agrees, glancing at him through the rear-view mirror. “Although I don't like that it's coming from you. No, please don't smile at me.”

Peter keeps smiling and leaning forward, his hand on Stiles' backrest. “Even though he was born human, even though he's a witch, even though you really should know better...”

Derek turns back to face him, his eyes flashing red. “Move your fingers an inch closer and I'll rip your throat out.”

“Very good,” says Peter, taking his hand back and relaxing in his seat. “As an alpha werewolf, you should be possessive.”

“And Stiles is not a witch.”

“Defending your mate, excellent,” says Peter.

“I think we have about two more hours,” Stiles intervenes. He doesn't know if Derek was serious about his threat but he's not about to test his patience. “We should settle on our story, Derek. Who asked out who?”

“You asked me out,” replies Derek.

“No,” Stiles scoffs. “You asked me out. Why would I ask you out?”

“Because you said we should stick to the truth if possible and you begged me to come here.”

Derek's flat voice makes Stiles blush in embarrassment. “It's a werewolf conference, of course I wanted to come,” he mutters, defensive. “And you said it yourself, it's traditional for alphas and pack emissaries to come together.”

“I could have come with someone else.”

“The others either didn't want to come or couldn't come. So you'd have to beg me if I wasn't willing,” Stiles shoots back.

“But you begged me,” says Derek, smug.

Stiles narrows his eyes. “Fine. I asked you out. But I only did that because I could see that you were pining.”

“You had no evidence.”

“I could see it.”

“See what?”

“Evidence.” Stiles doesn't wait for Derek to argue further and looks at Peter. “Anything else we should settle on?”

“Do you plan to have children?” asks Peter.

Stiles' jaw drops. “Uh...”

“Alpha Derek Hale, have you thought about having a werewolf lover to give you biological children?”

“It won't be that bad,” says Derek but he doesn't sound sure.

“Stiles, do you really feel that you're a full-fledged part of the Hale pack as you are? Have you considered turning?”

“Wow. Sounds lovely,” mutters Stiles.

Peter smiles. “Imagine three days like that.”

* * *

Anna has short, blond hair curling at the ends. She wears a badge that says 'Ask me anything!'. Stiles can see the moment Derek notices it. He can also see the moment Derek decides to not ask her anything.

“Alpha Derek Hale of the Hale Pack, it's an honor,” she says, smiling at Derek. “I'm so sorry about your family.”

She seems to be waiting for an answer so after a beat, Derek forces a reply. “Yes.”

Anna gives him a badge presenting him as Derek Hale, an alpha werewolf, and says, “I hope you'll have fun!”

Using the same deadened tone, Derek repeats, “Yes.”

Anna then looks at Peter and her smile dims. “Peter Hale.”

“It's beta Peter Hale,” Peter says.

Anna raises her eyebrows. “I thought it was dead Peter Hale.”

“Oh, no.” Peter corrects her with a charming smile. “Errors like that happen quite often with patients in a coma.”

Stiles appreciates the validity of the argument, even if it doesn't apply to Peter.

“Really,” Anna drawls, unconvinced, but gives him a badge and finally, looks over at Stiles.
“You’re not a werewolf.”

“I’m not,” confirms Stiles, choosing to ignore the odd accusatory edge to the statement.
“Stiles Stilinski, spark and emissary of the Hale Pack.”

“Is that so.” Anna keeps up her smile but it seems forced now. “I’ll write down a ‘witch’ on your badge, then.”

Stiles blinks. “I’m not a witch, I’m a spark.”

“You’re a magic user,” replies Anna offhandedly, already writing.

“Yes, as a spark,” says Stiles, his eyebrows scrunching up, not quite sure what’s the problem.

“This is just to simplify things.”

“He is a spark.” Derek inflicts his voice with enough irritation that Anna stops and looks up at him.

“Sparks are no different from witches.”

Stiles frowns. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far...”

“Write down that he’s a spark,” says Derek.

Anna looks ready to give them an eye roll but only sighs. “Alright.” She crosses out the already written ‘witch’, adds ‘spark’, and gives Stiles his badge. “Here.”

She adds enough spite to the word to let them know how unreasonable they are being.

“Thanks,” Stiles says. “I appreciate the effort.”

Anna ignores his remark. “Here are the keys for your cabin, number 23. Just go ahead the same way you drove here and turn right. There are signs to help you around.”

Stiles is the closest and reaches for the keys but Anna doesn’t let go.

“These are for the hands of alpha Derek Hale,” she says.

Stiles is about to ask if she’s serious when Derek says, “My mate will take care of them. Let’s go.”

Anna looks at Stiles in shock but drops the keys into his hand.

* * *

“So, that was a bit weird,” comments Stiles, getting into the Jeep.

“No, I expected as much,” replies Peter.

“I didn't,” says Derek.

Stiles huffs out a breath on his hands, trying to warm them up. The wheel is cold under his fingers as he starts driving; the brief pause they made was enough to cool it down. He really isn't used to the cold winters of Montana.

As he's driving, he spots another werewolf pack that just arrived. They are all in t-shirts even though everything around them is covered in snow.

“Oh,” says Peter as they stop the car.

“What.” Derek and Stiles turn from where they're getting out of the car to glance at him simultaneously.

“I think I know...”

Stiles closes the car door and rolls his shoulders — it's been a long ride. Peter is looking at a woman, a werewolf, judging by her tank top. When she notices Peter, she scowls and goes back to her cabin.

“I was right to think it was Kali, then,” decides Peter.

Stiles looks back at him. “What have you done.”

Peter shrugs. “I've always been popular.”

“Jesus,” mutters Stiles and starts walking to the cabin. “You have slept with half of the women here, haven't you?”

“Really, Stiles,” says Peter. “I've slept with a lot of men here too.”

Stiles doesn't quite know how to express his feelings at that but he doesn't need to. Derek's eyebrows seem to be doing the job well enough.

“And does your boyfriend know about that?” he can't help asking.

“Yes, and I know for a fact that he's glad for all the experience I've gained,” replies Peter smoothly.

Stiles can admit the question was a low blow but he doesn't feel bad about it; not when it's Peter. Derek's eyebrows still show disgust but it's not enough anymore. Stiles joins him in making a face too.

As Stiles takes out the cabin keys, he glances at the wooden door and freezes. “Yeah,” he says, voice rising a few octaves, “but like, were they glad for the experience?”

“‘Nobody wants you here’,” reads Derek.

The words are written in red on the door to the cabin. Stiles reaches to touch it but Derek grabs his hand. “Don't. It smells of magic.”

“Dude, I smell of magic,” says Stiles, somewhat offended.

“No, your scent is different,” says Derek, staring at the door.

“Different how?” There are more important things to focus on right now but Derek so rarely expresses his thoughts, Stiles can’t resist seizing the opportunity.

“It’s... sweeter.”

Stiles stares at him, not quite sure how to react. “Sweeter?” he repeats, frowning. “Can I take that as a compliment?”

“You should,” says Peter. “This was written with mountain ash. Are you sure you can smell magic as well?”

Derek takes back his hand. “It was there.”

“Because I am here ?” asks Stiles, mostly to distract himself from the tingling of his skin where Derek had touched it.

“No,” says Derek. “Be careful. We don’t know what’s inside.”

Stiles takes some photos of the door, then gets rid of the words. The wood seems oddly clean now, as if his spell was stronger.

He reaches for the keys but Derek stops him. “No. I’ll open the door.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything because whatever he can say would lead to an argument. There’s a fine line between being protective because you have the highest chance of survival as an alpha werewolf and being protective to the point of acting suicidal. Stiles doesn’t have the right answer to this problem. Derek definitely doesn’t.

He pushes the thought aside and follows after Derek.

Inside, there are two bedrooms as they requested enough space for three guests, including an alpha and an alpha’s mate. Peter’s bedroom is separate but the main one is open to the kitchen space and has a fireplace. After a brief look around, Stiles kneels before it to create a fire.

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, focuses on the power within himself, and leads it to the tips of his fingers. Stiles grins, seeing the fire already warming up the place. This came out way easier than he expected.

“Do you think it was one of your past lovers, then?” asks Derek. “Have you slept with any witches?”

“Of course I have,” says Peter, closing the door. “I don’t discriminate.”

Stiles doesn’t need to turn around to see Derek’s eyebrows rise. “What’s the plan for now?” he asks aloud, not wanting to risk another argument with Peter.

“You two should go to the ‘Packreating’, then Stiles has a workshop on magic and Derek seminar for alphas.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles says and this time turns to look at Peter. “And what about you?”

“I’ll be at the seminar on werewolf history.”

Derek stares Peter down. “Sounds riveting.”

“I know, right,” says Stiles, disappointed. “I wish I could be there too.”

“I’ll take notes.”

“Really?”

“No,” says Peter. “But I can ask the speaker for the presentation.”

“Ask,” repeats Derek. “Not exchange favors.”

Peter grins. “You know that I can’t possibly promise that.”

* * *

“Is there something specific you eat during these kinds of things?”

“No,” Derek says.

“Raw meat?”

“No.”

“Bones?”

“No.”

“Drink blood?”

“No,” repeats Derek. “The entrance is here.”

Stiles finds the door to the conference center and pushes but it won’t budge. He smiles at his mistake and pulls it instead. It still won’t move. Stiles pauses to give the door a cursory glance but there’s no information about this entrance being closed. It does seem sturdy, though.

“Can’t open it?” asks Derek, enough of a smirk in his smile that it gives Stiles a boost of energy.

“Watch me,” he says and tries to push the door again, this time not limiting his strength. Slowly, the door opens.

“Jesus,” mutters Stiles, finally inside. “That weighed a ton.”

“It weighed 155 kg,” says Derek. “This kind of entrance used to be common in werewolf meetings. It was to ensure humans wouldn't come in.”

Stiles looks at him, surprised. “Is it not used now then?”

“It's not as common,” replies Derek. “Some werewolves had trouble with this as well, especially the newly bitten-”

“Derek!” cries an older woman with long, red hair, moving towards them. “Oh, it's been so long since I've seen you. Years!”

“Yes,” says Derek carefully. The woman goes in for a hug and he tenses but lets her.

“And who are you?” she asks as she pulls back and smiles at Stiles. Her lips are so red and gaze so intense it almost feels threatening.

“I'm Stiles.” He realizes he should introduce himself as Derek's mate but can't tell if it's a word that is actually used among werewolves. Derek and Peter use it but they aren't very close to the werewolf community. Derek told him to act 'normal', though, so Stiles decides to be cautious. “Derek's boy-”

“Mate,” says Derek. “He's my mate.”

That made it sound like 'boy mate' which makes Stiles think of a 'boy toy' which would make him Derek's boy toy which — he needs to stop thinking. “Yes,” he confirms. It's important to show a unified front as a couple; he had read about that. He's ready.

“Your mate! How lovely,” she calls, surprised. “How do you like the conference so far?”

“I love it,” says Stiles as if he's been here for five hours and not five minutes. He's not even pretending to be excited. “First time I'm here. I'm really glad to have a chance to learn more about your culture.”

The woman's smile falters. “What are you?”

Stiles already knows that some werewolves aren't happy about humans attending. There's a minority against bitten werewolves as opposed to the born ones. A lot are very unhappy about witches attending. But hey, he's not a witch, he's a spark, and he's not fully human if he's a spark, so it's fine. “I'm a spark.”

He can tell by her expression it is not fine. “Oh,” she says, her tone completely different now, shifting her gaze to Derek. “You know that anyone would have taken you in after what you've been through. But no, you've wanted to keep your territory for yourself, and now you stroll in here as if you're still worthy of the name you carry.” She huffs out a laugh, shaking her head in condescension. “No, you will have to suffer the consequences of your arrogance. Who else is in your pack? Bitten werewolves, witches, and other bizarre creatures? Was it worth it? What would your mother say if she saw you?”

Stiles has heard enough; he needs to do damage control. So far it's only psychological in Derek but it may soon turn physical, considering his expression. “Right. Great talking to you.

Can you tell us where the 'Packreation' seminar will be held?"

"Room 201, just over there." The older woman looks over them both critically. "It's no wonder you're attending this seminar. Hopefully, you'll learn something of substance."

"Hopefully we'll never see each other again," Stiles replies, directing Derek to the side. Glancing at the clock on the wall further down, he decides they still have 3 minutes to make it to the seminar. It will have to do. "Who was that?"

Derek curls his lip. "I don't know."

"What?"

"I have no memory of ever meeting her in my life," says Derek.

Stiles opens his mouth, then closes it. "Does this happen to you often?"

"It's never happened to me before," replies Derek. "But this is the first time I'm attending the conference after the fire. It's always just been Laura."

Stiles nods. "Alright. That was complete bullshit, by the way."

"The message on the door to our cabin could have been addressed to me," says Derek.

"It might as well have been directed at me," says Stiles. "You saw how she reacted when I said that I'm a spark. This made no sense. You know that."

But Derek doesn't seem to listen to him. "I've never stopped to consider this. It's never even crossed my mind to let go of the land and join another pack. I didn't think of what it would mean in the future. I didn't think and--"

"Hey." Stiles grabs Derek's arm and moves closer, waiting for Derek to meet his gaze. "That was complete bullshit," he repeats. "I wouldn't give away the home my mother lived in if I could help it either. And no sane person would expect you to coldly calculate whether to keep the land or not right after what you've been through."

"As an alpha--"

"You didn't know back then that you'd end up being an alpha. But even as an alpha that's a terrible choice," says Stiles. "Look. Do you believe I should turn into a werewolf?"

"No," says Derek, as if it's that easy. Stiles wished he could share his conviction. "And my mother wouldn't believe it either," he adds angrily.

"Why? I could contribute more to the pack this way."

If he didn't die because of the bite. But theoretically, if Stiles were to turn into a werewolf, he would never be afraid of not being enough again. He might lose his magic though. But if he didn't, he could do so much more.

The chances of turning into a werewolf and keeping his magic are slim, but should Stiles abandon them if the payoff is this great? He obviously doesn't want to die. But if he could be sure he could get enough power to do more for the pack...

Derek frowns at him. "You're not a werewolf."

"And you're not clairvoyant," Stiles replies. He glances at the clock again, then looks at Derek. He seems a bit better. Stiles' own small crisis will have to wait. "We should go to the seminar."

They go to the hall which is almost full already. Stiles looks around and freezes. "You again?" he blurts out, seeing the red-haired woman they just talked with.

She looks at him along with many werewolves in the hall.

Stiles feels his face heat. "Sorry," he mutters to Derek. "I forgot about the werewolf hearing."

"It would be fine if you didn't," replies Derek and goes to take the free seats.

The meeting is — well — disappointing. Stiles keeps waiting to hear more about non-traditional packs like theirs up until Railey Hughes — as she presented herself — says 'thank you' and gets applauded.

Stiles joins in but looks at Derek. "And that's it?" he asks, incredulous. "Not gonna lie, I expected better. It was said three times how difficult it is to create pack bonds with non-werewolves and yet she never talked about it in more detail."

That's when he realizes that it isn't just Derek looking at him, but Hughes and many other werewolves in the audience once again.

Stiles sheepishly turns back to Derek, "I can still make a good first impression. I promise."

"You can't make a good impression among bigots."

Stiles stares at him, aware of everyone else staring at them. "You forgot about the werewolf hearing," he decides. "It's fine, I get it—"

"I didn't," Derek states plainly, then stands up. "Let's go. No wonder Laura was always exhausted after coming here."

"Right." Stiles leaves the hall following closely behind, ignoring the looks he gets on his way. Not the best start but hey, it's only the first seminar. They still have two more days.

They barely make it down the hallway before they hear a commotion. Some woman cries out, "You left without a word!"

Stiles frowns and glances at Derek, who only quickens his step. Turning the corner, Stiles almost bumps into him. "What's going—"

“Never contacted me again,” continues the woman. Stiles realizes she must be in the center of the small crowd forming. “How dare you stand here just to ask 'how do you do'?!”

“Wow, werewolf drama,” mutters Stiles, moving to stand next to Derek. “How embarrassing.”

That's when Derek mumbles, “Peter?”

Honestly, Stiles should have known. He should have known that the embarrassing werewolf drama involves a member of his pack.

“I've waited for so long.” The woman sounds close to tears now. Peter seems to say something in reply but Stiles can't make out the words.

He follows Derek and they manage to get through the crowd. In the center, Stiles recognizes the werewolf that turned away from Peter when they had arrived at their cabin, Kali.

“I kept waiting for any information. I really believed that you'd come back.”

Oh, the secondhand embarrassment is excruciating. Stiles feels bad for Kali but Jesus, this is a bad place and an even worse time for this.

“But you didn't,” continues Kali. “I was glad to hear you'd died.”

“First, I didn't die. I simply woke up from a coma,” says Peter and smiles, probably hoping to mitigate the tension. “I'm not a zombie.”

No one laughs and there are no answering smiles, which seems odd to Stiles. He decides to support Peter and nods. “Zombies don't exist,” he says, expecting the shift in attention but the looks he's getting suddenly make him doubt himself. He turns to Derek. “Right? He told me that zombies don't exist.”

“It's been years but you didn't change at all,” says Kali, looking away from Stiles. “Still a liar to the very core. But I already knew that,” she says and lets out her claws.

A murmur goes through the crowd; Stiles takes a step back.

“That's why I challenge you to a duel.”

Derek chooses this moment to step forward and stand between Kali and Peter. “I'm Derek Hale, Peter's alpha,” he says to Kali. “I'm sure we can resolve this peacefully.”

Stiles inches closer to Derek. Physical fights aren't his strength but he has to help somehow.

“We can't negotiate,” says Kali, not taking her eyes off Peter. “Not when he didn't even apologize for what he's done.”

“My apologies,” says Peter instantly.

“You think that's enough?” asks Kali, incredulous. “You-”

Kali lunges at Peter. Derek instinctively moves to protect his uncle and Stiles throws out his hand as if to stop Kali-

And she stills mid-swipe, suddenly frozen before Derek and Peter. She turns her head to look at Stiles, bewildered. "He used magic."

Stiles is glad that at least someone knows what he had apparently just done, but Kali seems aghast. "Um, yeah. Look, you attacked my packmates, so I wasn't gonna-"

"Witch," Kali spits out.

"This again? I'm not a witch," says Stiles. "I'm a spark!"

"Kali," says Peter, his voice going so soft and gentle in a way Stiles barely recognizes it.

"if i believe

in death be sure

of this

it is

because you have loved me."

In the silence that follows, Stiles says, "Why are you quoting E. E. Cummings' 'If I Believe'?"

While earlier Kali had looked at Peter with wide glistening eyes, the transformation in her expression is immediate and complete. Furious, she raises her hand and slaps Peter. No one reacts this time around; everyone seems to agree it was deserved. Next, Kali curls up a fist and punches Peter. Some people gasp and others make a sound of hurt, but again, no one stops her. Then, Kali lays out her claws and raises her hand-

"I'm going to need to stop you here," says Derek, stepping in.

Kali snarls at him but then only glares at Peter. "Fine," she mutters, letting down her hand. She strides away.

Peter touches his cheek and winces. "I thought our breakup was mutual."

"Shut up," says Derek and leads him away from the others.

"I'm so sorry," says Stiles, following after them. "I mean, I'm not sorry for roasting Peter but..."

"I would have done the same," Peter remarks.

Stiles looks at him where he leans against the wall. "So you understand."

“I do.”

Derek looks at their handshake with dismay. “Have you been to the Werewolf History seminar at all?”

“Yes,” says Peter, offended. “I barely went out during a break when she decided to demand a fight with me.”

“If that was a fight, you lost,” Stiles points out.

“If it weren't for your comment, I'd have won.”

“Shut up,” repeats Derek, more out of habit than anger. He looks at Stiles. “But it's true that if you hadn't mentioned Peter's words weren't his own, the situation might have gone differently.”

“I know.” Stiles grimaces. “I was already talking before I thought it may not be a good idea.”

“Maybe it's for the better that she knows the truth,” says Derek in a rare attempt at optimism.

“No,” says Peter at once. “No. No, it's not.”

Derek sighs. “You need to go back to the seminar. And I should head out to — what was it again?”

“You know that I know that you remember the name,” says Stiles.

Derek continues to look at him steadfastly.

“But you seem to have aged ten years in the last ten minutes so I'll say it. 'Alphastic Pack'.” Stiles can see Derek's internal battle and feels bad for him again. Enough to clap Derek on his back, even though it has never brought positive effects before. “You don't have to thank me.”

Derek sends him a glare. “I'm going to room 405.”

“And I'm going to room 410,” says Stiles. “We'll see each other during supper.”

* * *

Stiles is grateful to attend a workshop on magic. It might be a nice change after all the odd looks he's been receiving. Derek's seminar had looked promising too. And Peter's. Actually, Stiles would use Hermione's Time-Turner if possible to attend all the seminars. But he also knows he'd immediately abuse the power.

“Well, if it isn't the famous Hale spark.”

Stiles looks up, shutting the door after himself. There aren't many people inside and something about them seems different. He turns to be met with a cold gaze of a pretty woman with long, dark hair.

Stiles realizes he's late and for some reason, the instructor — Jennifer Blake, he remembers from the leaflet — already knows about him. He relaxes; he's been in this situation many times. She can't be worse than Harris.

“Thanks for calling me a spark instead of a witch. It seems to be a problem around here.”

“No,” agrees Jennifer, “you're not a witch.”

Something about her comment rubs Stiles the wrong way but he chooses to let it go. He'd be in a shitty mood too if he were a witch surrounded by werewolves.

He doesn't know why exactly werewolves and witches don't like each other. Werewolves don't like magic, true, but Derek, Peter and other werewolves in their pack have grown used to Stiles using it. But do they not like it because, on some level, they fear it? Do witches dislike werewolves because they are scared of their physical abilities?

He doesn't know. He's heard that the situation was worse in the past and now it's supposedly improved enough to at least try to have both werewolves and witches at the conference.

“I'm also not a Hale,” Stiles continues. “Although I am an emissary of the Hale Pack. Stiles Stilinski, spark.”

Does that mean that she thought that he was married to Derek? That's ridiculous. They're only fake dating. Or fake mating. Although, to be fair, barely two weeks ago Stiles would consider fake dating Derek ridiculous too.

All of these flit through his mind just before Jennifer says, “Jennifer Blake, the token witch.”

She sounds bitter. Stiles blinks, dragged back to reality.

“As you all know, werewolves are strongly prejudiced against witches and other creatures wielding magic, like sparks,” continues Jennifer, now turning to the rest of the audience.

Stiles goes to the first free seat, taking another look at the audience. He realizes now what seems different about them; they have warm clothes on. If any werewolves are present, there are fewer of them here.

“I was invited here as a symbol of inclusion and progress as if showing that these stereotypes are no longer a problem. That is not true, of course, but it is possible to survive and live the way you want among the werewolves. There are situations in which werewolves have to rely on magic, whether they want to or not. And that's why I'm here,” says Jennifer, looking around. “To show you how you can develop your magic because one day, you will find it necessary.”

Stiles is already captivated. He glances to the side and sees the girl next to him staring at Jennifer in amazement.

“This is the first time I will speak at this conference and, after what I have already said and plan to say, I can safely assume I won't be invited again. That's why I need you to focus. Practicing magic should be easier here, in any case. Roosevelt County, Montana is known for

its deep saturation of magic because of its proximity to a Nemeton.” Jennifer pauses and looks around at her audience. “Now, I want you to show me your magic.”

* * *

“This was amazing,” breathes the girl beside Stiles once the workshop is finished.

“It was,” he agrees. His magic back in Beacon Hills barely had any impact. If he could have as much power back in Beacon Hills as here, he wouldn't need to consider turning into a werewolf. His magic would be just as valuable.

“Right? I'm a big fan of Jennifer! I loved her research on turning by bite. Everyone is talking about Derek Hale but it's Jennifer that deserves so much more attention.”

Stiles looks at her questioningly. “Derek is that popular?”

“Ugh, yeah.” She rolls her eyes. “He's from a well-known family, rich, with a good territory — you have a Nemeton too, even if it's not as active as the one here — and good looking.”

“And taken,” says Stiles. He has mixed feelings about what he's hearing. “He's my mate.”

The girl looks at him oddly. “You mean you are his mate. But you're not a werewolf, are you?”

“So I can't give him werewolf babies,” says Stiles, trying to make it sound like a neutral statement of fact. He wants to have this theory validated or dismissed, not pointlessly argue about it again.

Well. Not argue much.

“Yeah... That too but mostly, you're not a werewolf and that's it, that's the big problem. No one's heard of you.” Her mouth twists in suppressed anger. “I mean, it's bullshit. Everyone knows it's bullshit. But rules like that have kept the werewolf community safe for a long time so...” She shrugs.

“No, I understand,” he placates. “Anyway, I'm Stiles. Are you going to supper?”

“Nadia, witch and emissary of the Moorehead Pack,” says the girl. “Not yet. I want to talk to Jennifer first. I'll see you there?”

“Sure, see you.” Stiles gets up and leaves the workshop. On his way, he sees Railey Hughes again who only gives him a fake smile, then turns to a woman next to her to obviously badmouth him. Stiles is a high school student, though. She'll have to try harder than that to hurt him.

He reaches the cafeteria where he spots Peter and Derek, who seems even more exhausted now.

“You alright?” asks Stiles, sitting opposite him.

Derek just grimaces and mutters, "I'll tell you later."

"Hey, is this seat free?" asks a woman in her mid-twenties, pointing at the chair next to him. She has a contagious smile on her plump face and a shirt reading 'GOOD VIBES ONLY'.

Stiles glances at Derek, who ignores her, and Peter, who gives her a creepy smile. "Yes," he decides, pretty sure it's the wrong choice but even so, denying would be simply impolite.

"Hi, guys," she says, sitting down. "Beta Yasmin from the Jimenez Pack. It's great to see you again, alpha Derek Hale."

Derek grunts, apparently having reached his quota of communication with other people for the day.

"We've seen each other before at the conference when we were still children," she explains, looking at Stiles. "It's been years, but you know, Derek's quite memorable."

"Am I," questions Derek flatly.

"I thought that would be me," Peter interjects.

Yasmin's smile tenses but she ignores the interruption. "Look, alpha Hale... Can I call you Derek?"

Derek gives her a tired look which Yasmin seems to take as an agreement.

"Derek, your position in the werewolf community has deteriorated very much in recent years. The Hale name alone can only get you so far. With your freak pack of non-werewolves, and a zombie for an uncle..."

"I'm not a zombie," Peter breaks in with a dismissive chuckle. "Can't you see how alive I am?"

Stiles catches his gaze and subtly shakes his head, trying to urge Peter to look for better words.

Yasmin looks away from Peter, blinking. "...and although it's great that you have a mate, he's rather... unconventional."

Stiles frowns. "Unconventional as in gay or-"

Yasmin glances at him, her eyebrows rising. "No, as in a magic user."

"Okay, but since we're here," says Stiles, seizing the opportunity, "why is that a problem?"

"Why is that-? Because you can kill him," Yasmin says, enunciating each word slowly as if speaking to a child.

"Me?" asks Stiles, incredulous, pointing wildly at Derek, "Him?"

But Yasmin turns to Derek again, placing her hand on the table as if trying to reach for him. “No one asks for your feelings, Derek. But you need someone from a well-established pack like Jimenez to remain in the werewolf community.”

“About that,” interrupts Stiles, sensing another chance to learn more, “why do we need to remain in the werewolf community?”

Yasmin blinks and tosses him an annoyed look. “What?”

“Well, you guys have never helped us,” says Stiles. “You must have heard of all the shit that went down in Beacon Hills. Yet no one has ever reached out to us.”

Yasmin narrows her eyes. “Defending the territory is the obligation of the pack to which it belongs.”

“Okay, so if we can't count on any help-”

“Don't twist my words,” Yasmin says coolly over him. “The packs do help each other. This situation was different since your pack is not reliable.”

Stiles tries to think it over. “You didn't help us because you weren't sure we would defeat all the dangers? That makes no sense.”

Yasmin gives him a condescending smile. “You don't need to understand. Derek,” she turns back to him, “this proposition is good for you. Think it over and...”

“The proposition of what, you being Derek's lover?” questions Stiles. When Yasmin doesn't reply, he continues, “That makes no sense either. You're a werewolf so theoretically, you can kill Derek as well. Not that you would succeed, Derek's hard to kill. He's like a cockroach and I mean that in the best way possible.” Peter catches his gaze and shakes his head, this time trying to save him, so Stiles tries to amend his words. “I mean, except that he's aesthetically pleasing.”

Yasmin raises her eyebrows. “It's true that you've always been easy on the eyes, Derek,” she says and gives him a flirty smile. “I look forward to discovering more of your compliments.”

“There's nothing else to discover,” says Derek in a matter-of-fact way. “And I'm not interested in your proposition.”

Yasmin sighs and leans back. “Think about it. If not for you, it's for the well-being of your pack. They should know their heritage.”

“Except it's not their heritage,” Stiles states plainly. “Besides Derek and Peter, we only have bitten werewolves who are apparently treated as worse compared to the born ones in your community. Plus we have some non-werewolves who don't have much in common with you.”

“Look, Stiles,” says Yasmin, putting odd pressure on his name. “This is not your decision to make. You barely know anything about us so stay quiet and-”

"I know that you didn't help us when we were attacked by the Alpha Pack," Stiles cuts her off. "I know that you did nothing when we discovered the Dead Pool and when we fought Dead Doctors. You didn't help with the desert wolf or when I was possessed by Nogitsune and attacked my own—" Stiles stops himself, realizing he's raised his voice. The people at the next table are staring at him so he clears his throat and takes a breath, trying to calm himself down. He looks at Peter and says, "I'm making a scene, aren't I?"

"Yes," says Peter, brutally honest. "I agree with you on all accounts, though."

"Sorry," says Stiles, glancing at Derek.

Derek shakes his head, dismissing the issue. He looks at Yasmin and pointedly says, "I'll think about your offer and let you know what my decision is."

"Very well," says Yasmin, standing up. "Think about your pack's future, Derek."

Stiles watches as she walks away, then unhurriedly sips his tea. He doesn't like where his thoughts lead him. "The Jimenez Pack is well-known."

Both Derek and Peter snap their eyes to him.

"She was—" he hesitates, searching for the right word before settling on the easiest, "...nice."

"Nice?" echoes Derek, bewildered.

"Since when do you care about being nice?" asks Peter.

Stiles makes a face at him, annoyed. "I'm just saying — look, her arguments were valid."

"You didn't agree with a single thing she said."

"No, she had a point," says Stiles, looking at the table. "Connecting with the rest of the werewolf community is important. And, you know," he continues, staring at his plate, "she was pretty. Good genes."

"What are you talking about?" asks Derek, incredulous. "Are you saying that I should have a child with her?"

Stiles shrugs. "It is a possibility you may want to explore and..."

"Peter!"

They look to the side, startled. There's a man on the other side of the cafeteria approaching them with an ironic smile. He seems to revel in the attention he's getting. "It's been years!" he adds, running a hand through his short dark hair before sitting down next to Peter and grinning at him.

It's only now that Stiles notices there's another man with him. This one has longer hair, parted at the center in a way that makes Stiles think of the hairstyles of boy bands.

“Theo, Liam,” says Peter. “I wasn't aware you knew each other.”

Theo leans back in his seat, his smile growing but still not quite honest. “I did a lot of exploration these past few years, Peter. A lot of discovering.”

“That's nice,” says Peter. He seems to have a stare-off with Theo.

Derek seems determined to eat his sandwich so when the silence stretches, Stiles decides to join the conversation. “Hi, I'm Stiles, Derek's mate and Hale Pack emissary.”

Theo looks at Derek, surprised. “You have a mate? That's great, congratulations.”

Derek makes a non-committal sound so Stiles gives Theo a smile in his stead. “Thanks. So you've been traveling recently?”

“No,” says Theo, looking at Peter again.

Stiles waits a beat for the explanation but nothing comes. “So how did you two meet?”

“We've dated,” says Peter.

Stiles' jaw drops. “Jesus! Were you 18 then?” he demands.

“Yes,” Theo replies, annoyed. Then he turns to Peter before adding, “And as willing to experiment as always.”

Stiles decides to not pursue that and turns to Liam instead. “What about you? How do you know Peter?”

“Oh, we've dated too,” says Liam. At Stiles' wide-eyed look, he adds, “I was 19.”

Stiles can only react in one way. “Jesus, Peter.”

“I was younger back then as well,” Peter reminds him.

Stiles looks at Derek but the werewolf seized the opportunity to practice some self-care by ignoring everything around him and focusing solely on his dinner. Stiles leaves him to that. “Right.” He clears his throat, determined to make this small talk work. “Did it start at a werewolf conference like this one?”

“That's how it started with Theo,” says Peter. “But I met Liam because we were both horse riding.”

Stiles stares at him. “But you're a...” When everyone, including Derek, looks at him to hear the rest, Stiles only says, “Never mind. I didn't know you were into horse riding.”

There's really nothing that strange about it. His mind may conjure the most bizarre images of werewolves riding horses but Stiles knows that werewolves are just some guys. If they are horse riding, they are just some guys horse riding.

“Peter was quite good,” says Theo. “Not as good as Liam, though. Just a while ago he's won the California Dressage Society Championship Show.”

Derek uses Peter's momentary distraction to drink some of his uncle's tea since his own is finished.

“Congratulations,” says Stiles, happy to be back on safer waters of small talk. “So you've upgraded, huh?” he jokes.

“Yes,” says Theo without a smile.

Stiles chuckles but when no one joins, he lets the sound die.

A dull thump echoes as Derek's head falls to the table.

Stiles empathizes — he feels just as tired — but can't help frowning. Derek isn't the type to draw other people's attention to his fatigue, not when the situation of their pack is this unstable. He reaches out to touch Derek's arm and asks, “You okay?”

“I'm tired,” mumbles Derek.

Again, Stiles has mixed feelings. As adorable as it is, Derek would never say that while in the other werewolves' earshot.

He notices Peter's half-drunk tea and his stomach drops. “Peter, what's in your tea?”

Peter tastes the drink and reels back. “It's drugged.”

Stiles doesn't stop to think, just instinctively uses his magic to neutralize the drug's effect on Derek. In the same breath, Peter whips around, releasing his claws and threatening Theo and Liam. “What have you done?”

“Nothing!” exclaims Liam.

“We don't even know this guy,” says Theo.

“This guy is my nephew and alpha,” replies Peter but relaxes his stance.

Feeling fatigued from the intense burst of magic, Stiles looks around at the other tables. The werewolves stare at them but no one comes.

Derek turns to the side and throws up.

“It's okay,” says Stiles, mostly to Peter but also to everyone else in the cafeteria. “I think this is the effect of the spell I used. I'll get you some water,” he adds to Derek and gets up.

On his way back, Stiles uses any spell he can think of to make sure the water is safe and clean. When he gives the glass to Derek, his hands are trembling from all the magic he's used in such a short period of time. Still, he uses what energy he has left to clean the floor.

Derek looks up at him from over his glass of water, now empty. "You should go back to the cabin."

"So should you," replies Stiles. "Let me help you up."

Derek gets up then turns to look at Theo and Liam, puzzled. Just as Stiles wonders if he's trying to go back to his role as an alpha meeting werewolves from a different pack, he says, "You're still here?"

"Um, yeah," says Liam. "It was nice to meet you?"

"Yeah, charmed," mutters Stiles, passing them.

"I'll go with you," decides Peter suddenly, standing up. "We can do this again sometime," he adds to Liam and Theo, trailing his fingers on their backs as he walks up to Stiles and Derek.

Stiles tries to not look horrified at this but doubts he's successful.

They exit the dining hall in silence, all feeling exhausted after the first day at the conference. Once outside, Stiles takes in a deep breath of the cold, fresh air. It's already dark, the moon barely visible in its waning crescent, the only lights coming from the various cabins. It's enough for werewolves but Stiles takes out his handphone to use the flashlight.

The snow crunching underfoot, few people around, and the sounds of the forest make the atmosphere oddly peaceful, heavily contrasting with the earlier chaos of the conference.

"This went well," says Peter.

Stiles looks at him, disbelieving. "It was terrible," he says. "People were suspicious of me simply because I'm a magic user, and I used magic like five times in public. All your past lovers seem to be here and hate you. Only Derek was deservedly popular but still had problems with the way our pack is 'non-traditional'."

"No, I expected worse."

"What is it that you expected then?" Stiles demands. "We were threatened, you were physically assaulted, and Derek was poisoned. Actually," Stiles pauses, thoughtful, "that makes three attempts. Three is a pattern. Someone wants to kill us!" he realizes, excited. "Or at least make us leave."

"And why are you happy about it?" asks Derek.

"We need to investigate. It'll be awesome." Invigorated with enthusiasm, Stiles manages to clap his hands even though one of his arms is around Derek. "What do we know so far? First, there was Anna who didn't like me and Peter." Stiles frowns. "But I guess that turned out to be normal here."

"Yeah, that is normal," agrees Peter. "Although not understandable."

“Then there was this bizarre note on the door to our cabin telling us to leave. That could be addressed to either or all of us.”

“I'm sure there was a trace of magic, so it needs to be a magic user,” says Derek.

“Not a werewolf, then,” ponders Stiles. “That makes things easy.”

“No. Werewolves can be magic users as well,” says Peter. “It's rare but not unheard of. Besides, many werewolves decide to keep it secret because of the unfavorable situation of magic users in the werewolf community.”

“Okay, that makes things hard,” agrees Stiles. “Then I and Derek met Riley, who led the 'Packreating' seminar. Do you know her, Peter?”

“Not very well,” says Peter. “She's always been interested in exploring different kinks than I was.”

“That's, uh...” Stiles tries to fight off the mental images of Peter and Riley exploring every kink he's ever heard of. “That's not what I meant.”

“Then no, I don't know her.”

“So she's our suspect.”

“No, I'm pretty sure she can't use magic,” says Peter. “A few years ago her pack had to ask Jennifer for help. She would have solved the issue herself if she were able to use magic. They didn't want anyone to know they had to contact a witch.”

Stiles frowns. “So how do you know that they did?”

“There was this man in their pack who was interested in exploring-”

“Okay,” Stiles stops him. “Okay. I get it. Anyway, what happened at your seminar, Derek?”

“A lot of people talked to me,” says Derek, visibly suffering at the memory. “Just as I came in, beta David from Leto Pack came up to me to say that he doesn't respect me as an alpha and that I don't deserve to be here with my fake pack.”

“Oh,” says Stiles. “What did you say?”

“That I couldn't care less what he thinks. Then I walked away but he followed.”

Stiles makes a face.

“Yeah, I remember he was awfully clingy,” says Peter.

“With just how many people did you-” Stiles stops himself, realizing he doesn't want to know the answer. “Never mind.”

“He said that others actually agree with him, they are just too scared and trying to be politically correct but he is not afraid to say what he really thinks.”

“Ugh, there's a guy in my school who's like that about racism,” mutters Stiles.

“So I said that I don't care what he really thinks either.”

Stiles frowns. “That's it? He's still alive, right?”

“I didn't fight with him,” replies Derek. “...as much as I wanted to when he said that I'm not a real werewolf.”

Stiles and Peter look at him, both knowing how destructive Derek can get. It's rare for him but Stiles has seen the extent of the damage he can cause. By now, he trusts Derek to stay calm; but he doesn't trust other werewolves not to provoke him to the point where Derek has to act.

“I asked whether he wanted to check it and he finally let off.”

Stiles lets out a breath.

“That's not all, though,” Derek continues. “During the pause, I also talked to beta Ingrid from the Cotten Pack when her alpha, I think he's called Jake, joined us and kept talking over me.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were talking about the seminar, how biting is a dominant way to turn someone into a werewolf. There's magic too, curses, some people research it more thoroughly but biting is still dominant. It also usually means this person joins that alpha's pack. He said that some alphas are too lazy to bite anyone and would rather have non-werewolves in their pack.”

“What an asshole,” says Stiles.

“It's not even true,” Peter points out. “You did bite Christopher's wife.”

“That's — that's not a good example,” says Stiles.

“I'm grateful for that, though.”

Stiles stares at Peter. “Does Chris know that you say stuff like that?”

“Yes. He thinks-”

“No, no,” says Stiles quickly. “No, you don't need to tell me. Please don't tell me.” He turns to Derek and asks, “Did anything else happen?”

Derek shrugs nonchalantly. “I wasn't paying all that much attention to people. These two were the most obvious and Jake was actually pretending to be talking to Ingrid, and ignored my replies.” He frowns. “A lot of women talked to me, though.”

“I hate both of you,” says Stiles. “At least in my seminar nothing really happened, I just practiced magic. What about you, Peter?”

“Ah, I met a lot of old acquaintances. It was quite nostalgic.” Peter smiles, reminiscing.

Stiles already doesn't want to hear more and judging by his expression, neither does Derek. He cuts to the worst part. “Okay. How many people propositioned to have sex with you?”

Peter frowns. “No one, I think.”

“Ha!” Stiles doesn't even bother to hide his schadenfreude. “No one!”

Derek looks at him oddly. “How many propositioned you?”

“What? No one,” says Stiles. “But I'm making fun of Peter, are you going to stop me?”

“No,” says Derek. He smirks at Peter and repeats, “No one.”

“Actually, now that I think about it, there were some people who suggested-”

“Too late,” says Stiles. “I won't believe you now.”

“He's telling the truth,” says Derek.

Stiles looks at him, crestfallen. “Whose side are you on exactly?”

“Yours.”

Stiles' lizard brain immediately misinterprets the reply.

Derek turns and says, “So don't lie, Peter.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Very mature. To answer your question, Stiles, no one opposed me as obviously as Derek. Many people asked whether I was a zombie.”

“I'm still angry about that,” Stiles mutters petulantly.

“I wouldn't change anything,” replies Peter with a grin. “But Alice seemed rather cold towards me and Nicole ignored me when I greeted her. I was sure we parted agreeably but...”

“Yeah, you thought you'd parted with Kali agreeably.”

Stiles keeps thinking about this the rest of the way to the cabin, continues when Peter stays outside to call Chris and when Derek takes a shower. Anna acted pretty much normally, considering the standard here. Riley didn't seem like the type to leave weird notes — Stiles thinks she'd rather confront them directly. Kali as well; she confronted Peter publically, after all. Maybe it was alpha Jake or beta David that Derek mentioned? But would they argue with Derek while others saw them after leaving the note? What about Alice or Nicole that Peter spoke of? Not to mention, it may not be just one person but three or more, although that's rather improbable.

Once Derek is finished, Stiles takes a shower as well, different scenarios swirling in his head. He is so preoccupied with theorizing it takes him a while to understand why after leaving the bathroom he's looking at Derek laying on his bed.

Because it is not his bed. As much as the Conference tries to pretend to be inclusive with the seminars on how to create the links between werewolves and non-werewolves in a pack, with the attendance of witches and other magic users, the organizers still assumed the mates will share a bed.

Even more importantly, Derek's eyes are red. "Dude, your eyes are doing it again."

Derek blinks and after a while, he manages to have them back to his hazel ones.

"Maybe we should ask someone about that," considers Stiles. "It's not the first time it happened."

Stiles remembers the first time, although it's hazy. He was in a pretty bad shape back then and Derek was taking him to the hospital. He was back in his human form but his eyes were still red. He barely managed to take away the glow before barging into the hospital.

That was also the first time Derek met Parrish. Stiles wonders to this day what the conversation between the two looked like.

Back then he didn't think much about the eyes thing, figured it was because of stress. But the other times that happened didn't confirm the hypothesis. It seemed to come at random times: while watching TV, cooking, or digging up graves.

Derek shrugs, looking away. "I don't think it's anything important."

Stiles still can't move closer to the bed. "I slept with Scott."

"I didn't," replies Derek.

Stiles replays this exchange, certain that something is off. "No, I mean — I shared a bed with him, not—"

"I meant both."

"I didn't make it weird," says Stiles. "Not yet."

"You have started making it—"

"No, you started it when you laid down on the bed!"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Well, you could have waited for me."

"To lay down together?"

“See?” Stiles comes and slumps down on the mattress, defeated. ”You made it weird.”

“You already made it weird when you talked about your sexual partners.”

“I wasn't talking about-” Stiles cuts himself off and makes a face. ”You make me sound like Peter.”

Derek doesn't reply at first, so Stiles reaches for his handphone to set his alarm clock.

“You get on well with him.”

“With Peter? Yeah, I guess,” mutters Stiles, now writing a message about their first day to the rest of the pack. The signal here isn't good but it should go through.

Again, there's a brief silence before Derek asks, “The age difference doesn't bother you?”

“Huh?” Stiles glances at him, still busy with the message. “Not really. I mean, we've been through so much shit together it wouldn't make much sense in our case.” He frowns. “That sounds as if I'm attracted to Peter but I'm not.”

“You're not?”

“Derek. We can't talk about this now.”

Derek sighs, reclining completely on the bed. “Because it'll make things weird?”

“Talking about being attracted to someone is banned when you're in bed with someone.”

Derek frowns. “Are you sure that makes sense?”

The door clicks and Peter comes in, smirking at Stiles. “I've heard something about someone being attracted to me.”

Stiles narrows his eyes. “Literally no one said that.”

Peter slowly walks through the cabin, reaches the door to his room, and leans against it, turning to Stiles. “In any case, I'm here.”

“See?” Stiles says to Derek with distaste. ”You made it weird again.”

“I can wait,” adds Peter, closing the door after himself.

“There's already a man in my bed!” replies Stiles, agitated.

Peter doesn't reply and the silence only underlines Stiles' words.

Stiles lets out a sigh. “I know,” he says to Derek preemptively.

“You made it weird.”

“I know!”

But a part of Stiles is relieved. If he were with someone like Peter, he'd feel terribly stupid now. With Derek, he knows that even if it's not entirely understood, it is accepted because Derek accepts him.

He glances at Derek, who has closed his eyes already. Stiles can't help looking at his eyelashes, his stubble, his lips, before finally turning away to sleep.

It was a long day but it might be an even longer night.

* * *

Stiles wakes up to the feeling of warmth and to the smell of coffee. The warmth comes from Derek, hugging him in sleep, which sours the experience into an embarrassing one. The coffee comes from Peter, already up in the kitchen, further deteriorating the moment.

“Want some coffee, Stiles?”

It's gotten even worse, thinks Stiles. Peter already knows he's awake by his changed heartbeat. (Faster heartbeat because he thinks he can feel Derek's hips. Not his dick. Just his hips and Stiles' imagination is already running wild.)

“Sure,” he croaks out and immediately clears his throat, wondering if he woke Derek with his terrible voice. But he can still feel warm, rhythmic puffs of breath on the back of his neck and slowly tries to get up.

It's not easy to escape Derek's hug while knowing that Peter can hear everything, even if he's turned away. When Stiles manages to escape to the bathroom, his face is red not only from embarrassment, but also required strength and flexibility.

Afterward, Stiles reluctantly joins Peter. He has expected this conversation for a while now. At least the coffee is good. It's very good, actually, but the taste just seems jarring as he waits for Peter's words.

He's never made any remark to suggest that he knows Stiles is in love with Derek but it must be obvious. Stiles was only waiting until a moment like this one when Peter would finally say what he really thinks.

He doesn't know what to expect. Yes, Peter and he get along rather well but it doesn't mean that Peter will approve of this relationship. And Stiles wouldn't need Peter's approval if it wasn't for one thing; if Peter is against it, Stiles knows the reason will convince him to let Derek go.

He just doesn't want to let him go.

“I didn't think it would come to this,” says Peter, looking out of the window.

Stiles glances at Derek, still asleep. “Yeah.”

“I must have noticed it earlier. I suppose I simply didn't want to admit it to myself.”

Stiles drops his eyes and nods. His stomach is so twisted he can't even think of breakfast. He knows that any relationship within a small pack is a risk, but when it concerns the alpha it's even worse. Stiles believes that even if it didn't work out, he could still be friends with Derek, but that's just what he thinks. There's no guarantee. And does he have any right to change things if it could weaken their pack?

“Because it's dangerous for the pack,” he says.

“Yes,” agrees Peter.

Stiles twists his lips, suddenly angry. “So?”

Before the words are out, nothing is different. He can still be with Derek the way he has. He doesn't have to change anything just because of Peter's vague remarks. He's not changing anything unless Peter states it clearly and out loud.

Peter grimaces. “I think I said enough.”

“No, you didn't,” barks Stiles. “Just — finish this. You started this.”

Peter sighs again and puts his mug down to finally look at Stiles. “I'm not going to apologize to you.”

This makes Stiles pause. “Apologize?”

“That's what you expect, don't you,” says Peter.

“Yes,” agrees Stiles because there's always something Peter can apologize for. “But what would you apologize for if you were to apologize?”

Peter narrows his eyes. “You thought we were talking about something else,” he realizes. “About what?”

“Nothing,” says Stiles but his body betrays him, his heartbeat picking up. “Nothing.”

Peter looks at Derek, then at him again. “It had something to do with Derek.”

“No,” says Stiles, his face flushed.

“Is it about the fact that you're in love with h-”

“Oh my god, would you pipe down?” hisses Stiles. “He's right there!”

“You thought I cared about you being in love with Derek? I don't,” says Peter.

Stiles frowns at him. “I'm glad it's not a problem but I don't like the way you said that. He's your alpha and your fami-”

Stiles' alarm clock suddenly comes to life, interrupting him. Derek groans and reaches for the mobile to shut it down, then blinks at them. “You two are up already?” He scowls. “What

were you talking about?"

"Nothing," says Stiles. It's becoming his favorite word.

"Your love life," says Peter at the same time.

Derek's eyebrows scrunch unfavorably at Peter. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Exactly," says Stiles.

Derek doesn't seem to understand but gets up and goes to the bathroom. As soon as the door closes after him, Stiles rounds up to Peter. "You can't tell him that."

"He wouldn't believe me anyway."

Stiles pauses. "Yeah, that's fair. I wouldn't believe you either. But still, don't tell him!"

Peter leans against the counter. "Or?"

"You need an incentive? Seriously?" Stiles makes a face but thinks about it. "I'll make you a carrot cake."

"Deal."

"You agreed too easy-" Again, the realization comes too late. Stiles looks at Peter, betrayed.

"You can't blackmail me into baking carrot cakes indefinitely."

"Of course I can. We've just made a deal."

"You're evil, Peter." Stiles finishes his coffee and frowns. "...except you're not. You thought we were talking about you bringing danger to our pack earlier and you were really concerned. You didn't even watch us in the bed."

Peter grimaces at him. "You make me sound creepy."

"You are creepy, Peter," Stiles replies. "Is it about your past relationship and mistakes catching up with you? It had to happen sooner or later. Nothing to do about it now. But it's good to know that you feel somewhat guilty about it." Stiles puts his mug in the sink. "More importantly, you really don't see any problems? What if I and Derek start dating but then break up? I don't want to leave the pack."

"Then don't break up."

"Yes, but what if? Do you think we could still be friends after that?"

"I don't know."

"Derek can't leave, he's the alpha. But I wouldn't want to leave so we'd have to both stay. I think the rest of the pack would help us live peacefully alongside each other but would it be enough? Would Derek let me use his kitchen? I really like it."

“Who knows?”

“Oh my god, my dad would try to get us back together first,” Stiles realizes. “And then, if he failed, Parrish would try to reconcile us too. That's horrible.”

“Horrible,” agrees Peter.

Derek comes out of the bathroom. “So what is it you're talking about?”

“Your love life,” says Peter again.

Derek scowls at him again and looks to Stiles for an answer.

“No, we were, uh...”

“Talking about your relationship with Stiles,” says Peter.

Stiles freezes.

“You need to kiss more,” explains Peter. “Yesterday you were behaving like friends.”

“We are friends,” says Derek.

“Yes, but with benefits, and these benefits are not visible,” replies Peter.

“Because there are no benefits,” says Derek.

“That's offensive,” says Stiles. “I've given a lot of benefits to a lot of people.”

“Like Derek?” questions Peter.

“Friendship with me is full of benefits,” continues Stiles, ignoring him.

“Like what?” presses Peter.

“Like — like hand-holding.” Stiles bears the following silence. He tries to believe in this benefit.

“Any other benefits?” asks Peter finally.

“Up for discussion.”

“Maybe kissing?”

“Up for discussion,” repeats Stiles but he can feel his face flushing already.

“You're not selling this too well,” comments Peter. “And you should have discussed this before coming here.”

“It's Derek's fault that we didn't.”

“It's unnecessary,” says Derek. “People already think we're dating.”

That's true. Whenever they go to the only diner in Beacon Hills, Ellen, the owner, checks if they're touching and smirks at them. She believes that Stiles is in love with Derek (true) and that Derek is in love with Stiles (false) and that they're both stupidly pining for each other (half true, half false). Yeah, she thinks she has it all figured out.

Then there's Parrish. When he first appeared in Beacon Hills, he saw them in the middle of stressful situations where either Stiles thought Derek was dying or Derek thought Stiles was dying. So obviously, they behaved somewhat differently than normal. Parrish tries to be supportive and whenever he catches Stiles or Derek alone, he stops by to talk. That's how Stiles found out that Parrish is bisexual and was happy to know more members of the community. Stiles said that he doesn't know any community. So Parrish assumed that he's closeted because of his father and now, he tries to make Stiles' dad aware of the struggles of LGBTQ+ teenagers. Except Stiles' dad is happy to oblige because he knows that Stiles is bisexual and in love with Derek. Sooner or later, they'll realize the misunderstanding but for now, Stiles is happy to just watch.

And finally, Harris. Since Derek started hanging out around school and Stiles talked to him, Harris decided Derek was his boyfriend. He used that in a derogatory way, not realizing how uplifting to Stiles' social status it would be. So now the people in his high school think they're dating too but at this point, it doesn't really matter. Stiles hasn't spent much time in school because of everything that was happening; it's only recently that the situation has calmed down. But by now, his time in high school is almost finished.

“And you believe that people thinking you're dating is enough after everything you've seen yesterday?” asks Peter.

Stiles and Derek look at each other.

* * *

So now they're holding hands. Stiles can be cool about that. Derek's hand is soft and warm and as soon as he can, Stiles leaves it to open the weight door to the conference.

Still, once inside, he needs to go back to handholding, trying to ignore Peter's smirk.

But Peter is ready to milk this thoroughly.

“Stiles, are you blushing just because Derek's holding your hand?”

Stiles is going to kill Peter. “Yes,” he says through his teeth.

“Your heart's racing.”

Stiles doesn't see the werewolves glancing at him. “Mmm.”

“Why are you so nervous? It's been three months since you two got together.”

“Yeah. Well. It always feels like. The first time,” manages Stiles, his face burning.

“That's so-”

“Oh my god,” says Stiles, slowing down. “Why is her neck like that?”

Kali throws her head back as she laughs, further exposing the mark on her neck. It looks as if she was bitten.

“She is mated,” says Derek, surprised.

So that's how the mating bite looks. It's closer to mutilation than Stiles expected. Similar to the mark Scott had after he was bitten by Peter; painful to even look at.

“Peter!” says Kali, noticing them. She excuses herself from the group she was talking to and comes up to Peter, immediately going for a hug. “I'm so sorry for my outburst yesterday,” she says, leaning back. “Sometimes, a new person just — steals you completely.”

“Who's the new person?”

“Jennifer Blake.”

“Jennifer?” repeats Stiles, incredulous. “She's a witch!”

Kali raises her eyebrows, suddenly appearing much more dangerous. “And?”

“Yesterday you had a problem with me using magic.”

“Jennifer is nothing like you,” says Kali. “She'd never use magic against me.”

Stiles can't help looking at her bruised neck. “What about your mark?”

Kali smiles, now sweetly shy as she touches the clear outline of teeth. “That's just a bit of wolfsbane.”

“That's — that's magic,” says Stiles.

“You're jealous, aren't you,” replies Kali, her smile broadening. “Everyone here knows about Kate Argent. Did you know that Derek gave her the mating bite? And here you are, in his pack, publically dating, and he still won't recognize you as his mate. Why do you think that is?”

“I think that's none of your fucking-” starts Stiles, when Derek raises his hand and bites his wrist.

When Stiles was a child, he went with his parents — his mom was still alive then — to the beach. It was a hot day and as soon as he could, he ran into the ocean. The water was shockingly cold and even though he expected it, his body felt odd. There was pain all over his muscles, nothing that would suggest an injury but it hurt to swim. He tried to move but the sensation was too weird and he couldn't calm down his breathing. When he finally got out, his parents told him that it could have been a cold water response.

That's how he feels now, as a red hot wire suddenly submerged in ice-cold water. He gasps at the pain, his mind sluggish as he watches Derek licking the skin, cleaning it of blood. Distantly, he registers that Derek must have taken his pain because he doesn't feel anything.

Finally, Derek lowers their hands, still linked. "I hoped to make it better," he says, looking at Stiles. "I was in no hurry because I knew you deserved more. There's no point in showing off the mark if you don't believe in what it means."

Everything seems slowed down. Stiles looks back and asks, "On the wrist?"

Derek seems to sense that something is wrong but before he can answer, Peter says, "That's a traditional place for the mating bite; it's been this way for centuries. It's only recently that the werewolves started placing mating bites on the neck."

"Right," says Stiles and wills himself to finally play his part. He looks at Derek and asks, "Should I bite you as well?"

He feels queasy.

"I don't think anyone wants to see that," says Kali.

"Wow, you're in no place to be judgemental," replies Stiles immediately. It's a good opportunity to forget about his mark. "Your neck was maimed and I have to look at it all the time."

Kali touches her mark. "This is a beautiful proof of the love between--"

"I'm glad you're framing it this nicely but I can only see hurt and blood here."

"Is that what you see on your wrist?"

"No," says Stiles. It's true because he sees here physical proof of the lie. He wills himself to look down where his fingers are interlaced with Derek's, to the mark, and smile. "Thank you, Derek."

Stiles cannot lie to the werewolves. That's why he needs to believe in whatever he's saying, even if the reason is ridiculous. Now, he's grateful to Derek for making it clear what they are not. That's how he can say 'thank you' and be honest.

He'll have to talk to Derek about it later, though. He's read that the first rule of a good relationship is clear communication.

Kali looks at them with a frown. "That's not how giving the mating bite should look like."

"Jealous?" Stiles can't help asking.

"Actually," Peter butts in again, "the public giving of the mating bite was quite common back in--"

“You know, this is actually none of my business,” says Kali in a surprising burst of clarity of mind. “I’ll go have breakfast in the cafeteria.”

“Now?” says Stiles after her, stunned. “Now you realize it’s none of your business?” Kali doesn’t acknowledge him so he only makes a face and looks at Peter. “I have no idea if what you said is true but thanks for that.”

“I made it up,” says Peter.

“Really?” asks Derek.

“No.”

Stiles has no patience for this. He latches onto yet another topic to avoid talking about the mark. “By the way, did you manage to get the notes about the werewolf history seminar?”

“I’ll have them tomorrow morning.” Peter smiles. “Because I’ll be spending the night getting them.”

“No, that’s too much information again,” says Stiles, suffering.

“Well, I had fun but now I’m hungry,” states Peter.

“Shut up, Peter,” says Derek. He looks at Stiles but before he can say anything, they are interrupted.

“Stiles?”

Stiles turns to see Nadia walking up to them. “Hey, good to see you.”

“Hi. Sorry I didn’t come yesterday, I talked with Jennifer longer than expected.”

“No worries.” Stiles shows Derek and says, “This is Derek, my — my mate. And alpha. Hale.”

“Nice to meet you,” says Nadia, shaking Derek’s hand. “Nadia, witch and emissary from the Moorehead Pack.”

“And that’s Peter. He’s Derek’s beta.”

Nadia greets Peter, then turns to Stiles again with a smirk. “I see that you’re claimed now.”

Stiles lets out a self-conscious chuckle that sounds only half freaked out. “Yeah, it’s only just happened.”

There’s a beat where Nadia keeps looking at Stiles as if expecting to hear more.

“I’m hungry,” repeats Peter.

“Yeah, cafeteria, let’s go to the cafeteria,” says Stiles, immediately turning there.

Derek finds his hand again and glances at him as if to make sure it's okay so Stiles tightens his hold in answer. It is okay. He wanted Derek to bite him, after all.

* * *

The first seminar is 'Mating: When Blood Isn't Enough'. That means that Stiles and Derek walk there together, the air tense between them.

Finally, Stiles takes a breath and creates a spell to keep their conversation private. "That was an asshole move."

"I know," says Derek immediately. "I'm sorry."

"It's not about what this bite means. It's because I didn't expect that at all. I freaked out, I couldn't control my expression."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, it's fine," says Stiles. "It was worth it just to see Kali's face."

"No," says Derek, his voice so hard Stiles looks at him. "What I did was inexcusable."

"No, it wasn't," replies Stiles, frowning. "What Kali said was disgusting. If I knew what you wanted to do, I'd agree to the bite. Plus I asked you to bite me when we were driving here."

"I hurt you."

"You kept it as painless and bloodless as possible."

"I used you to prove Kali wrong."

"She went too far. She had no right bringing up K-"

"No, Stiles, I went too far," snaps Derek. "Don't try to justify what I did. It was wrong."

Stiles pauses. "What I did yesterday also wasn't okay. When I destroyed Peter's apology to Kali or when I commented out loud how bad the seminar was."

Derek frowns. "No, that's different. You didn't..."

"These were mistakes," Stiles stops him. "I was wrong to do them."

"Your mistakes didn't hurt me."

"They hurt the pack," replies Stiles. He can see that Derek isn't convinced and sighs. "Look, the way I see this, we both made mistakes. But it's alright because we're more than that. Aren't we?"

Derek nods after a beat.

They reach the door to the seminar so Stiles stops and turns to Derek. “I'll dissipate the spell, okay?”

Derek nods again and looks back at him. “I'm glad you came here,” he says after a second.

Before Stiles can figure out how to react to this (apart from blushing. That appeared on its own), Derek opens the door and comes in.

Stiles follows and sits down next to him. He can feel someone's gaze and turns to see a man frowning at him, then looking away with a clearly annoyed expression.

“Who's that?” asks Stiles quietly.

“Beta David,” explains Derek. “The one that talked to me yesterday.”

The man moves in his seat as if uncomfortable. He must have heard them.

Stiles realizes that he didn't notice anything odd since yesterday evening; no new messages, no threats of bodily harm, no attempts at poisoning. He looks at the man more closely, trying to decide if he's angry enough to do something about it apart from talking down to Derek and showing his disapproval to Stiles.

The man sighs loudly and leans back in his seat as if trying to forcibly relax but Stiles can tell from his shoulders how tense he is still. He frowns; he doesn't think that someone willing to poison Derek, or Peter, would have trouble being observed.

It's no proof but Stiles discretely looks around, trying to tell if anyone's watching him and Derek.

They are. A lot of people look at his wrist, watch Derek, stare at him. It might be because he's human while the majority seems to be werewolves; it might be because he's Derek's mate; it might be because he's just received the mating bite.

Now it's Stiles that sighs and leans back, trying to relax. This will be long.

* * *

“Taking clothes is quite common for werewolves because they try to recreate the smell of people they associate with safety and comfort,” says Charlie. Short hair, a loose shirt, and jeans; Stiles couldn't figure out if Charlie was a man or a woman. Then Charlie said the pronouns are they/them and Stiles was relieved from wondering. “It's common for the alpha werewolves to take clothes from their mates, especially if they don't live together.”

Stiles remembers that he's missing some of his clothes; his red hoodie, the white and plaid shirts. He thought that he misplaced them somewhere at Scott's. Recently, though, he took up cooking and has been spending more time at Derek's — he loves Derek's kitchen. Huh, that's an odd coincidence.

“Bringing red things as a gift is very common. It originates from bringing dead animals as a sign of strength.”

Stiles remembers the one time they fought with a wendigo and Derek finally killed it only to throw its dead body at Stiles' feet. It annoyed him at the time; he doesn't like burying corpses.

Another day they've been watching something together and Derek brought him a bowl of red gummy bears. Stiles laughed and asked if Derek doesn't like their taste. Derek agreed but there was something odd about his expression.

Just before coming to the conference, Derek bought him strawberry ice cream. Stiles said that he likes chocolate better; he thought that Derek would remember it by now. "Too bad. Eat it," replied Derek.

"Eyes changing to red even in the calm setting, when the alpha is not using their power, is another very common sign," continues Charlie.

That — that just happened yesterday.

Stiles realizes he's been sitting in the same position from the beginning of the seminar. His fingers are clutching the pen and his leg's asleep but he doesn't dare move to not bring Derek's attention to himself. He's afraid to even blink because it may let Derek know that he knows.

He doesn't know what he knows but he has a feeling.

He has a very strong inkling that maybe his friendship with Derek isn't exactly just friendship anymore.

"Now, you may wonder if mates give any signs of thinking of their alpha as their alpha-mate."

Oh my god, screams Stiles inside his head. Outside, he's careful to not give any sign. Of anything.

"And there are," says Charlie, oblivious to Stiles' suffering. "Showing off your wrists, neck, and ankles — showing off your vulnerable areas — as a sign of trust and devotion. Saying 'alpha', acknowledging their role. Seeking out touch, touching in general which can take the form of hugging, rubbing the alpha's neck, playing with their hair..."

Oh. That's fine. Stiles doesn't think he's done any of it. Sure, he touches Derek — they've just been holding hands — but nothing that would make it odd or special in comparison to other pack members.

He wants to try all of it, though. He wants to see Derek's reaction to Stiles showing his neck, saying 'yes, alpha' while touching Derek. Exactly; he could combine all three simultaneously for the maximum effect. Not now, though. That would be far too telling. Or maybe he could do it soon and turn it into a joke. That's shaky ground, though. He doesn't know how seriously Derek takes all this mate thing. But he can't be very serious about it if Stiles is pretending to be with him, can he?

Stiles remembers suddenly that he was supposed to observe people to check for anyone that could have something to do with Derek's poisoning. He glances around but only notices a woman looking at Derek appreciatively. He straightens his back, trying to shift her attention and she does, immediately looking back to Charlie.

By now, the seminar is almost finished. Charlie asks if there are any questions and Stiles has plenty, but not to them. He waits it out all tense, not sure if he wants the seminar finished to get it over with or to go on forever to escape the conversation he'll need to have with Derek.

Finally, Charlie thanks everyone again and officially ends the seminar. Stiles hears Derek sigh next to him and prepares for the worst.

“Stiles-”

“I have to go to the next seminar,” says Stiles over him. “Sorry, no time. It’s on the other end of the building so-”

“Excuse me,” interrupts a dark-haired man. “Alpha Derek Hale and Hale Pack emissary Stiles Stilinski?”

At their nod, he continues.

“My name is Joshua, beta in the Williams Pack,” he says with a smile. Something about his expression makes Stiles think about Peter: there's the same confidence bordering on arrogance.

“I'm glad to finally meet you two,” he continues. “You haven't been to this conference in the past years, have you?”

“Only when I was a child,” replies Derek.

“First time for me,” says Stiles.

“Yes,” Joshua says, shifting his weight and bringing himself closer to Stiles. “How do you like it so far?”

“It's very — educational,” says Stiles, surprised by proximity.

Derek keeps himself from replying, probably for the best.

The man looks into Stiles' eyes. “I hoped we could educate ourselves too,” he says.

Stiles is pretty sure these words are supposed to carry a second meaning but he doesn't catch it. “Um, yeah,” he says instead.

“I couldn't help noticing you — both of you,” Joshua adds. “Besides, you're the talk of the conference.”

“Good talk,” says Stiles hopefully.

When Joshua doesn't reply at first, Stiles shakes his head and adds, "It was a joke, don't worry about it."

"I've heard a lot but I would like to form my own opinions on you," says Joshua.

Stiles smiles as though that isn't an even worse idea. Derek isn't exactly a social butterfly; his preferred methods of communication are grunts and nods. In the past, Stiles would consider that an advantage; Derek says too little and Stiles too much, so in a sense, they balance each other out. There are more ways in which they complement each other: Derek is the brawl and Stiles is the brain. (Theoretically; there have been many times where Derek showed his intelligence and Stiles, his abilities). Derek has strength and Stiles has magic. (Most of the time; Derek has been poisoned before and Stiles needed to show off the effects of the lacrosse practice). In the beginning, he also thought that Derek has trauma but Stiles... well, this one didn't age well.

Ever since the Nogitsune, Stiles has been having these doubts. He knows it's all over now. But would he really know if it wasn't? He knows he's back, he knows it's really him now again. But would he know if it wasn't him? These thoughts have no meaning, of course. In the end, Stiles still needs to go on, meeting others, sleeping, and fighting. But every other night, the doubt is too strong and he wastes his magic on checking if Nogitsune is still there. Sometimes, even that doesn't help and he needs to reach out to pack.

All in all, they aren't the best people to get to know.

"Well, there's no need to form your own opinion on Derek," says Stiles. "He's as awesome as you've heard."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," Joshua says, his voice dropping lower. He glances at Stiles. "But I'd like to get to know you too. In depth." Suddenly, Joshua freezes, looking at Derek. "Am I intruding?"

"No," says Derek, his eyes red. "It's fine."

"If you guys aren't interested—"

"No," repeats Derek. His whole body is tense, jaw tight, hands in fists. "I'm not jealous. I'm not possessive."

Joshua huffs out a laugh. "I don't mind if you are. Would you like to visit my house?"

"For what?" asks Stiles.

Joshua smiles. "I think your alpha understands."

"Yes," says Derek shortly.

"I find you both very attractive and would love to learn more about you — about your bodies." He says that while keeping Stiles' gaze, his expression open and honest.

Well. That's suggestive. But Stiles still isn't convinced what's the point. “I can assure you I have the same body as you, even if I'm a spark.”

Joshua laughs and wets his lips. “That's not quite what I meant. I'd love to have sex with you — you and your alpha.”

Stiles' brain shuts down.

At least this is not the first time he's received an offer for a threesome. Although the first one came from Peter and Chris, so it hardly counts. (Stiles is ashamed to admit, even in the privacy of his own mind, that he considered it. His association with Peter and kinship with Allison aside, Chris is really handsome. His annoying character, dark mind, and stupid smile aside, Peter is also... No, Stiles can feel his soul getting corrupted.)

Still, to think this is the second time he was proposed a threesome. Stiles had no idea he was so attractive to werewolves. Yeah, forget Danny and gay guys — Stiles is apparently a werewolf catnip.

“I don't want to keep you now, between the seminars, so think about it and find me if you're happy to get to know me better.” He winks at Stiles and gives him a half-hug with a whispered, “I'm waiting.”

It's not that Stiles is completely unprepared. Plenty of people have half-hugged him before. Danny winked at him once too. And he's whispered with others plenty of times in the past, though usually in a very different context. But all that at once, coming from a really good-looking dude, is still overwhelming.

“Right,” Stiles says finally. “Thank you. I think we will think about it. I, I really will. Think about it.”

The man gives him a grin and walks away.

Stiles turns to Derek. “So. You interested?”

“No,” says Derek.

“Really? Cause this guy was really-”

“No,” repeats Derek.

“Alright. But he was really willing so-”

“No, Stiles.”

“Okay.”

There's a brief pause until Derek asks, “And you?”

“What? No.” Stiles waves his hand. “Can't go if you don't go. Bad for our act anyway. He'd notice we don't have experience with each other.”

“Why?”

“Huh?”

“You can go. Without me,” says Derek.

“No,” says Stiles. “We are mates and...”

“It's pretty common among werewolves.”

“No,” repeats Stiles. “It's not a good idea. No.”

Joshua is attractive but Stiles wouldn't be able to enjoy this — he would only see who Joshua is not. It could end up being annoying, awkward, then miserable.

There's another pause and Stiles thinks back to the seminar, all the signs and tells. He suddenly doubts them all. He knows he should talk about this with Derek but he doesn't find the strength for that.

He looks away and says, “I should go to the next seminar.”

“Stiles-”

“We will meet at supper, okay?”

Derek looks at him for a second too long but finally, nods and walks away.

Fuck the healthy relationship advice and clear and open communication. Stiles has too much to lose. He doesn't want to know what's going on with Derek, what all this means. He already has ideas in his mind he'd rather not have; he wants them gone. Can't they just be friends? Nothing has to change. Stiles is happy with how they are. It's fine this way.

But are they really friends? No, that's a stupid question. Of course they are. They have never talked about it, never talked about their relationship — is it a relationship? There is some association, some involvement, so yes. They are in a relationship.

Stiles starts walking to the next seminar. How come he isn't sure if he's even friends with Derek?

This is like dark matter. There's no way to have proof of its existence but without taking it into consideration, nothing makes sense. Galaxies wouldn't behave the way they do if there was no dark matter and that implies the existence of dark matter.

Derek wouldn't behave the way he does if there was no deep friendship between them. Is that good enough to assume that Derek may actually be in love with him? It's good enough for NASA. Then again, NASA doesn't deal with relationships.

No, dark matter is a legitimate concept. Accepting that he and Derek have a vague relationship status is useful too if he takes into account that it's something like friendship,

except with Derek behaving like Stiles is his mate, the mating bite, and Stiles being in love with him. It makes sense.

He still isn't satisfied but it's not like NASA is satisfied with the theory of dark matter. Stiles has heard of some projects to bring proof of its existence. It's no wonder that Stiles wants to know the truth of his dark matter too.

Stiles gets to the next seminar just as it starts. He takes out a notebook and a pen but as he listens to the introduction, he can already tell the lecture is not for him. He takes notes anyway; he's not Derek's real mate. If Derek — when — if Derek decides to have a mate and they are a werewolf, Stiles will be able to share the knowledge. He can be productive in his jealousy.

Because a mate needs to support their alpha. Their opinion isn't equal to alpha's but it is different from beta's. Their support doesn't need to take the form of words; it's even better to do it wordlessly, just by showing your neck in a sign of submission and devotion, flashing your eyes as a sign of power and readiness to act. Throughout the day, it's good to check on your mate by extending your senses. If anything alarms you and you contact your alpha — with moderation, of course — it'll show them how much you care.

But Stiles can't do that. He's human. He thinks he could get around it with his magic, but he's not at the point where his power is endless to use, even with the Nemeton. He needs to save his energy for whatever danger may appear next.

When Amanda, mate of Michael of the Lee Pack, thanks them for their attention and asks if there are any questions, Stiles spontaneously decides to pose one.

“Stiles Stilinski, mate of Derek Hale of the Hale Pack and Hale Pack emissary,” he introduces himself. “Thanks for your presentation, it was very interesting although rather focused on the werewolves. Do you have any advice for non-werewolves? Humans, witches, sparks?”

Amanda raises her eyebrows and says, “Non-werewolf mates are a minority. There's so few of them, there's not much point in talking about them.” She sighs and continues, “However, if you insist, it's what I already said. Showing off your neck as a sign of submission. Appreciating your alpha. Learning the non-verbal signs werewolves use is important, you should definitely do that. And one more thing: if you think that you can do some of the things I mentioned with magic, it's better if you don't.” She catches his gaze and says, “I don't know of any werewolf that likes magic. It's better if you don't show it.”

Stiles feels as if he was dirty. He knows he's no better and no worse than the werewolves here but hearing all this, seeing their looks; it's tiring. The first tendrils of 'what if they are right?' creep over him even as he keeps reminding himself it makes no sense.

He thanked Amanda, sat down, waited until the end of the seminar, and walked out.

It was unfair. Stiles wanted to shout in Amanda's face that Derek — yes, the popular guy Derek, alpha of the Hale Pack — likes the scent of his magic. He said it was sweet! Stiles will treasure this memory as long as he lives.

He curls his hands, fantasizing in anger about hitting Amanda, then catches himself on the image, shocked that he'd think about exerting violence on a woman, then reminds himself she's a werewolf and his punch wouldn't do much without magic, and then he wonders if this is how it starts: by reminding yourself it's not the same if it's them.

He's so tired. Just one more day.

Stiles walks into the cafeteria. Derek and Peter aren't there yet so he grabs a tray of food and sits at an empty table. Before he can swallow, Theo and Liam sit on the other side.

"Are you okay? How is Derek?" asks Liam.

"He's fine," says Stiles, surprised.

"Can't believe he got poisoned. Do you know who did that?"

"No." Stiles looks at them and asks, "And you? Who do you think it was?"

Stiles knows their opinion has probably little to do with the truth but it's a way to learn more about them. However, before they can answer, Yasmin walks up to him.

Stiles grimaces and says preemptively, "Derek's not here."

"I know," she says. "I came to talk to you."

"Did you poison Derek?" asks Liam.

There's a long pause before Yasmin says, "No. But I wouldn't tell you the truth if it were so."

Liam holds her gaze. "Because I'm bitten?"

Stiles isn't sure he wants to see what can happen next. "What is it you want to talk about?"

Yasmin licks her lips. She has a different shirt that says 'WHAT IF TODAY WE WERE JUST GRATEFUL FOR EVERYTHING'. "We clearly both want what's best for Derek and his pack."

Stiles doesn't like agreeing with her.

"What we differ in is the means of achieving what's best," Yasmin continues. "I believe Derek and the members of your pack would be better off in a community with other werewolves. You think they should stay apart and be forced to helplessly watch as you practice magic, forced to be around other bizarre creatures-"

"Okay, oh my god, stop there, will you?" Stiles cut in. "I'm not making Derek or anyone watch me as I practice magic or-"

"Beta Yasmin from the Jimenez Pack," says Riley Hughes, smiling widely. Her lipstick seems even more aggressively red than yesterday. "Dear, I've been looking for you! What are

you talking about with him,” she adds, sparing Stiles a glance. It's still enough to show the volume of her distaste.

“It's about Alpha Derek Hale,” explains Yasmin and turns back to Stiles. “Look, we already have a common point. I don't want to fight! We can find a solution that benefits us all.”

“Or you can just go away,” replies Stiles. “Why did you need to talk to me?”

Yasmin's expression gets serious. “I saw that Derek claimed you. You have more influence over him than you realize, Stiles...” She pauses and makes a face. “Do I have to call you Stiles? What's your actual name?”

“Mieczysław,” says Stiles.

“What?”

“Mieczysław,” repeats Stiles. Then, fed up, he adds, “It's really not that hard to pronounce.”

“Anyway, Stiles, you can convince Derek to keep in touch with us. He may not realize it, but he needs us. Do you know whom to look for when you're building a house that will need to withstand werewolf strength and diminish werewolf hearing? Do you know how to find a doctor or a therapist that knows about our struggles? Do you know how to make an alcohol that can be enjoyed by werewolves? ”

Stiles shakes his head and says, “Look, in the end, it'll be Derek's decision so-”

“Promise me that you'll talk with him about it,” says Yasmin.

“Talk with me about what?” asks Derek, joining them.

“They know how to make werewolves drunk,” says Stiles. “They'll tell us if we cooperate with them.” He turns to Yasmin and asks, “Do you get hangover too?”

“Yes.”

“Awesome,” breathes Stiles. “Imagine Jackson. Imagine Scott! And Erica, and I wonder how Boyd's drunk persona looks like-”

“So it's alright that they offended my mate?” Asks Derek, looking at Yasmin.

(Oh. It feels nice to be called this way by Derek.)

“I understand that it makes you angry but magic users aren't werewolves. They are not loyal.” Yasmin pauses and sighs. “I know because I trusted one.”

“And I trusted werewolves even though one, my best friend is no longer human, two, I was possessed, three, Allison, Aiden, not to mention all the innocent people like Tracy Stewart died. All that just because werewolves appeared in my town,” says Stiles. “And still my mate is a werewolf.”

(Hm. It feels nice saying it too.)

“You can't possibly compare the two!” Riley bursts out. “Werewolves have always been discriminated against, always assumed to be the worst by humans while magic users live amongst them with no trouble. My mate and son died because of people like you. How ignorant can you be?” She stands up, shaking in her anger. “I expected so much better from you, Derek.”

She walks away and uncomfortable silence follows.

“I should have gone to that Werewolf History seminar,” reflects Stiles. “I clearly shouldn't have talked about something I don't know enough about.”

“Not necessarily,” says Peter. “Magic users have been discriminated against as well, although in recent years it's true that werewolves were in a worse position.”

“That was years ago,” says Yasmin. “The situation is very different now.”

Peter shrugs, relaxing in his chair. “There were times when being a magic user resulted in death while werewolves lived unperturbed.”

“I see you're playing knowledgeable as always, Peter,” comes a new voice. It's Jennifer. She doesn't sit at their table, only stops on the other side from Peter, looking down at him.

Peter gives his charming smile. “You know me so well.”

“I wish I didn't,” replies Jennifer. There's no trace of a smile on her face. “And I've heard that just yesterday you lied to Kali again. Old habits die hard, don't they?”

“Oh, what is it this time?” demands Peter, losing his smile. “Did I lie to you as well? Forgot to officially meet your pack? Wouldn't let our relationship grow to anything more than physical?”

“Our relationship was barely physical,” replies Jennifer.

(Peter frowns, probably remembering it differently.)

“But no,” she continues. “It's because you didn't care about our research.”

Everyone turns to look at Peter who seems as surprised as them.

“Lying, cold, unfeeling — there really is nothing to redeem you. Is there anything good about your life? Anything you could be proud of?”

“Well-” starts Peter but Liam is faster:

“He's a good dom.”

Theo smirks. “He's a good sub too.”

Stiles can't tell if they're genuinely trying to be helpful.

Jennifer ignores them. "There's nothing," she decides. "Not a single thing—"

"Don't you remember the things we have accomplished together?" asks Peter, unmindful of the whole cafeteria watching their soap opera inaction. (Stiles tries to ignore it and eat his sandwich but the secondhand embarrassment gets to him a lot.)

"The day we found a secretory leukocyte protease inhibitor," says Peter gently. "When we discovered the magic formula that could work. All the nights spent in the lab, analyzing DNAs..."

Jennifer stays quiet. (The cafeteria watches on, enraptured.)

"The time we laughed at Cummings' poetry, its stupid punctuation, how childish the poems are and—"

"They aren't," says Jennifer. "It wasn't until I met Kali that I realized how true it is when he says, 'it's you are whatever the moon has always meant'."

Stiles has never had any strong feelings about Cummings' poetry. Bewildered, he glances at Derek but he's tense, watching Jennifer carefully.

"You still don't understand, do you? It doesn't matter how academic or not you think his poetry is. It's whether the words can connect with you — and they can. Once you feel what I feel to Kali, you'll understand."

"I've never felt that," replies Peter. "And I never will."

Jennifer smiles but it's an odd, chilly twist of lips. "All the better for me, then."

Derek only has enough time to shove Peter away before he's hit with the spell. Stiles gets up, his reaction belated as always with the werewolves, and throws the first spell he can think of at Jennifer, but she flicks it off and turns to Peter again. Derek seems dizzy but is turned now, his eyes red, claws out, roaring at Jennifer. He pushes Stiles behind and jumps at her. Stiles grabs something from the table — it turns out to be a butter knife — and throws it at Jennifer as Derek keeps her in place. Fueled with magic, the knife cuts deep into her arm.

Jennifer pushes Derek off with magic and groans, taking out the knife. It falls to the ground with clutter, the sound oddly loud in the cafeteria's sudden silence.

Jennifer glares at Stiles and before he can react, he's hit with a spell he's never seen before, causing multiple cuts everywhere on his body. He stumbles back but sees Derek stepping in and tries another spell. This time, it works — Jennifer suddenly stops moving and Derek seizes the opportunity to slash her chest.

"Fuck!" shouts Jennifer, focusing on Stiles again. The next thing he knows, he's pushed against the faraway wall, then falls down to the floor.

He's not sure what's going on at first, only aware of the pain in his head and body. It hurts really bad. Stiles can't take a breath and doesn't dare open his eyes. God, his head hurts too much. He's so tired, he doesn't think he has any power left. But he has to move. He'll only take a deep breath and-

* * *

Stiles groans, feeling something wet on his face. "Wha..."

It's a dog. Stiles has been at Deaton's clinic with Scott too many times to not recognize this sensation. But he was at the werewolf conference, wasn't he? Why would a dog...

He opens his eyes. "Derek?"

Derek stares into his face and makes an odd, soft growling noise. He's still turned; red eyes, too-long teeth, claws. And he's really close.

"Uh, whassit-"

"We're back in the cabin," says Peter.

Stiles tries to sit up on the bed but groans in pain. Fuck, his head hurts bad. He wipes his face, then leans to the side and notices Peter far at the entrance, leaning against the door.

"Don't move around too much," says Peter. "Jennifer has healed only the most critical injuries."

"Jennifer?"

"We've come to an understanding," explains Peter.

"What understanding?" asks Stiles slowly. "I thought the problem was that you were lying, cold, and unfeeling."

"No, that was the excuse," says Peter lightly. "Jennifer wanted to use the new spell she created."

Stiles turns to check up on Derek, who is still staring at him. "Dude, you okay?"

Derek makes another soft growl.

"What's wrong?" asks Stiles. Suddenly panicked, he starts touching Derek, searching for a wound. "Are you hurt? Peter, what's going on?"

"Calm down," says Peter lazily. "The spell was supposed to hit me so Jennifer's not sure what the effects may be."

"Calm down?" repeats Stiles. "Calm down?!" His voice raises, going shrilling. Derek realizes something's off and turns around, keeping Stiles right behind him, and growls at Peter.

“Jennifer's a very talented witch,” says Peter. “He should be fine.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Don't get so angry so soon,” says Peter. “I told you to save your strength.”

“Okay, I don't understand anything,” says Stiles. “Derek? Why are you still turned?”

“That's the effect of the spell,” says Peter. “Probably.”

“Probably,” echoes Stiles, freaked out. He puts his hand on Derek's arm. “Dude? You there?”

Derek turns his head, sniffs his fingers and licks them before looking back to Peter.

Stiles takes his hand back. “Why is Derek like this?” He asks again, trying to look over Derek's back. He really is rather wide in arms and Stiles means that in the best way possible but he needs to stretch his neck to see Peter.

Peter sighs. “Did this spell make you stupid?”

“Well, I don't know,” says Stiles slowly. “Did it?”

Peter rolls his eyes. “You'll be fine. The spell wasn't supposed to change anything about the person's mental abilities or personality.”

“What was it supposed to do, then?”

“Don't you know about Jennifer's research?”

Stiles frowns. “It's about turning into a werewolf, right?”

Peter huffs out a laugh. “I suppose that's what she says. No, she wanted to create a spell that could make werewolves turn into humans.”

Stiles looks at Derek. “It doesn't seem to be working.”

“It was supposed to hit me,” Peter reminds him. “We'd like to keep observing Derek-”

“We?”

“Well, this is intriguing,” says Peter. “Unfortunately, we don't have the right place to do that, and besides...” Peter takes a step forward and Derek growls at him, his stance changing, ready to attack.

“So I think it's best if I go to the seminar for now. These are the last hours, after all.”

“What the fuck,” says Stiles.

“Do you have your mobile?”

Stiles pats his pocket and takes it out. It's working and he still has enough battery. “Yeah.”

“Alright. I will be back tomorrow morning.”

“Peter, Derek is — feral or — I don't know,” says Stiles. “Can you, like, at least give me advice or something?”

Peter looks at Derek, then at him again. “Show him your wrist to calm him down,” he says. “But don't worry, you'll be fine. Bye!”

Peter closes the door and Stiles is left staring at it, speechless. Derek stepped forward when Peter moved and now he keeps watching the door, pacing before it.

Stiles turns to stare at him. This is insane. Is this really what's happening? He closes his eyes, focusing on the sound of Derek's steps and the creaking floor. He takes a breath to feel the smell of wood in the cabin. He can sense the coldness from when Peter opened the door to go out.

He opens his eyes and decides to first make sure how deep Derek is in. “Can you look through the window to see if anyone's outside?”

Derek goes to the window and looks out. Even this simple action seems intense.

Okay. So he can understand human speech.

“Let me see what time it is,” says Stiles, reaching for his mobile again but still watching Derek. “Derek,” he adds in the same mild, announcing tone.

Derek looks back at him.

Before Stiles can be happy that Derek recognizes his name, he notices the dirt on his clothes. “Jesus, is that blood?” he demands. “We need to get you cleaned, buddy.” He gets up — slowly, feeling his muscles an inch from failing him — and Derek's at his side in an instant, helping him up. “Thanks. Let's go to the bathroom.”

Slowly, they reach the sink. Stiles wets a towel and takes Derek's claws in his hand. It's odd, cleaning his hands when he's turned. Stiles has never done that before, not even when Scott had problems with control. Gradually, he manages to clean his claws, as long and sharp as they are. Through all this time, Derek keeps still and silent but doesn't look away from Stiles. There's an odd smile on his face.

What's weirder, though, is that Derek keeps on sniffing his neck. At first, Stiles lets him be; the dude has been through a lot recently. Stiles is part of the pack and his scent must be comforting. But pressing his cheek to Stiles' nape, keeping so close they're basically stuck one to another and occasional licking just seems a bit excessive. “Dude. Um. Derek? I need a bit more space.”

Derek ignores him.

“Come on, man,” adds Stiles, defending himself with his elbow. “I need freedom of motion here.”

Derek takes another deep breath and moves to Stiles' back.

This does let Stiles use his hands more freely but also means Derek's now glued to his back. Stiles vividly remembers the porn he watched recently where the actors happened to be in exactly this position.

Well. This is bad. Is his thinking slower than normal? Stiles' anxiety has always been out there but now it's definitely increased. He sure as hell is confused. Is this concussion or-

Derek gives him another lick, this time reaching his earlobe and Stiles exhales sharply and moves so Derek has to step back. "Right. We're finished here."

Except they are not.

"You need to change clothes," he says to Derek, eyeing him critically. "And take a shower. Can you take a shower?"

Derek nods.

"Alright. I'll bring you fresh clothes."

Stiles sighs and slowly exits the bathroom, then goes to Derek's bag. He sits on the bed heavily, already tired, then reaches inside.

He remembers there was a time he used to feel uncomfortable about poking into someone else's stuff but now, after months of practically living in Derek's loft with the rest of the pack, it makes no difference to him. Especially since it's Derek — Stiles knows his clothes as well as his own.

He finds a clean shirt, underwear, and trousers, lets himself rest for a while and goes back to the bathroom. Derek left the door open so he leaves the clothes inside, looking at his feet.

The cabin feels cold so Stiles goes to the fireplace. He's half tending to the fire, half resting again when Derek joins him, happy to sit behind Stiles and sniff his neck again.

Stiles can't say that he understands but he leaves Derek be. Something else is occupying his thoughts. When the fire is no longer in danger of dying out, he tries to will through the exhaustion and distract himself by tidying up, doing the dishes, and packing up since they're leaving tomorrow. But it doesn't work, even if Derek inadvertently helps by following him everywhere and sniffing him.

Stiles escapes to the bathroom, dreading what he'll see. Slowly, he takes off his jeans and — yeah. He's completely erect but not excited. It feels really fucking weird. Stiles' dick has always been quite big, at least from what he's read. Having it full all the time for a — what, 40 minutes? — is bizarre. And inconvenient.

It's not a random boner he sometimes gets. It's nothing like the morning wood he had just today. But Stiles doesn't know what else to do than masturbate. By now, he's familiar enough with his body to touch himself in the most pleasant way and get off soon.

He does. Nothing changes.

He stares down at his body, starting to freak out. He hears breathing outside the bathroom and realizes Derek must be just behind the door. Jesus. He really takes being apart from Stiles badly; maybe it has something to do with the unfamiliar place? This isn't his territory, after all, and Stiles is the only packmate.

So yeah. Derek's quasi-feral, Stiles' dick is sick, and Peter's gone to represent the Hale Pack. Stiles wants to cry. He chooses to lament everything to Lydia... Except he has no service.

He tries to pee but only a few droplets go out. His dick is still inflated; this cannot be good. On a spur, he decides to take a shower but the water feels unpleasant on his dick and the soap is only worse. He doesn't stay there long.

Stiles dries himself and changes clothes. As soon as he's taken a step out, Derek presses his nose onto Stiles' neck.

“Woah, it's okay, let me go out, Derek,” says Stiles. He awkwardly keeps his arms raised, tries to pet Derek on the back, then puts them down. “It's going to be so weird once you get out of this. How will I look you in the eyes?”

Derek doesn't reply, only presses closer. Stiles gives up; it's not like he has the strength to fight Derek off, especially since his magic isn't yet recovered. He leans against the wall and tries to think of something else as Derek keeps sniffing and licking him.

He tries his mobile again but there's still no service. He looks up, seeing some movement. “Wow,” he breathes, for a second focused on something other than his deviant dick and Derek's body being dangerously close to his. “It's a snowstorm.”

It's completely dark outside with the new moon, but he can see the snowflakes rolling out in waves thanks to the small lamp outside the cabin, spiraling about. He's never seen a snowstorm before; he's completely captivated.

That's when Derek moves in even closer to him. Stiles tenses, feeling his hips, and then Derek does this awkward thrust.

Stiles opens his mouth to say something but Derek bites his neck lightly and instead of words, an odd 'uhh' sound comes out. It doesn't stop Derek from rolling his hips again, licking his neck.

“There's — no need for this,” manages Stiles. He takes a step away from Derek and pushes his right arm between them. “Look. I already have the mating bite, okay? Besides, there's no one here to pretend for!”

Derek growls and finds his neck again.

“Oh my god, I'm fucked,” mutters Stiles. “Why did Peter say showing a mating bite would help? Maybe you just want to maim me to death.”

Stiles is going to kill Peter. But by then he'll probably be killed by Derek and it's not like Peter would avenge him.

Derek keeps on thrusting, licks and bites his neck. Stiles starts to feel lightheaded. He leans against the wall behind him; the world starts spinning. He groans and tries to step away. “No, Derek.” He shoves him away but feels weak as a kitten. Derek probably doesn't even notice. “Stop it... Fuck. Stop!”

Gathering more strength, Stiles pushes Derek away and stumbles to the side, then manages to get on uncertain feet to the bed and lies down. “Fuck. My head is killing me.”

Derek whines quietly and takes a step forward. Stiles sighs and pats the bed. “It's fine. I know it's not you, not really. And it's not like I wouldn't want that if I were in your place,” he adds with a chuckle, then stops. “That's creepy.”

Derek lies down next to him, then whines again and pushes his head to Stiles' stomach. Stiles lets his hand naturally fall to Derek's hair and starts playing with it. “I really hope you won't remember all this once you're back. But you have to come back. I mean, okay, you're kind of sweet like this... And hot. You're really hot. Yeah, forget this one too. But the pack needs you as an alpha, y'know?”

Lying down is better. Stiles just has to make sure he doesn't fall asleep; he probably doesn't have a concussion but it's better to be safe. He's heard of people dying in sleep after hitting their heads.

His dick is still full, though. He takes out his mobile to look it up but he still doesn't have service and the cabin has no wifi. And where is his pack when he needs it? (He doesn't need Peter, though.)

Now that he thinks about it, maybe it's for the best that the rest of the pack is not here. Feral Derek is a handful; Stiles can't imagine managing feral Scott and others at the same time. It's not certain the spell would have the same effect on them but it's probable. His situation is very specific but it does show that maybe, in a pack, Stiles shouldn't only consider his own strengths and weaknesses. They already have many werewolves — do they actually need one more? Stiles may be weaker on his own but he has magic that isn't accessible to the rest of the pack. If they cleanse the Nemeton and allow for the flow of energy similar to the one here, Stiles could grow to be just as important.

He pushes himself up to avoid falling asleep. Derek follows after him and rolls Stiles' shirt up to breathe in his skin.

It's almost nice, actually, with snow outside, quiet, the only sounds are the wind, their breathing, the fire crackling. It's a pity Derek's feral and his dick's-

It's priapism, Stiles remembers suddenly. He read about it in the past. Something like this is possible, it's not necessarily a weird effect of magic. He doesn't remember if there was any treatment, though, and he can't check it now anyway.

Derek's like this because of the spell. But is Stiles'... condition... also a result of the spell or something else? Jennifer's healing? Jennifer's healing spell's reaction to her earlier spells?

Stiles rubs his face with a sigh. His face! When he looked in the mirror, there were no wounds but he's sure that when they were fighting, Jennifer cut his cheek. But then, when he woke up, Derek was licking his face. Stiles looks at his hand; he has a distinct memory of having wounds there too but now, the skin is smooth. Peter said that Jennifer healed only the most critical injuries and Stiles doubts she would bother with simple cuts. That must have been Derek's licking; werewolf saliva has some healing properties. Maybe in big quantities it also causes priapism.

It doesn't matter. Stiles grimaces, feeling his boxers and jeans trapping him as he shifts. He thinks about changing but he doesn't have looser clothes; he'd have to stay only in boxers, or, even better, nude. The problem is that Stiles isn't sure if he can trust Derek right now. Worse, he doesn't know if he can trust himself. Stiles isn't very straight when it comes to Derek; he's pretty gay. At least he's known this for a while.

He lets out a long sigh and closes his eyes. He fists his hands and relaxes them, tenses all the muscles in his legs and loosens them up. Straightens his hand and bends it, messes his hair, and corrects his shirt. Nothing helps. His mind keeps coming back to his groin.

Fuck, this feels awful. And it's so fucking bizarre! He's pretty sure it got worse. He doesn't know how much longer he can keep like this. He stares at the flames, thinks that he should add more wood soon, and disregards the thought as he cannot imagine moving right now. Turns to look out of the window; it's still snowing but not as much as earlier. Looks down to where Derek is lying with his face in Stiles' stomach. Plays with his hair a bit more.

He sighs again, trying to ease the discomfort this way. Checks his mobile; there's no change. Curses Peter. Feels bad for himself.

And finally, it seems to not be as bad as it was. Stiles goes as far as moving his legs and even though it's still uncomfortable, he can bear it. His fingers play an odd rhythm as he waits, impatient to be free of whatever this is. After a while, he realizes how annoying it must be for Derek as he looks up at his hand, but then only puts his face into Stiles' stomach again. Stiles takes it as a good sign and continues.

Right. He thinks he can get up, now. Deep breaths, moving frowning Derek aside, explaining he needs to take care of the fire.

Once he's standing, Stiles realizes he's hungry. It's already 9 pm; the seminars have finished by now and Peter must have gone for the, uh, for the notes on werewolf history. Stiles decides to prepare sandwiches and shares them with Derek. Yeah, he feels much better now. His dick isn't oversensitive and his head isn't pounding anymore. They'll be able to get out of here tomorrow.

He's doing the dishes when he hears, "Thtile."

Stiles turns and sees Derek right next to him. He seems excited. "Thtile," he repeats.

Slowly, Stiles recognizes the sound. “Stiles,” he says, can't help a wide smile. “You can speak?”

Derek nods.

“It's getting better for you as well! Can you shift back?”

Derek shakes his head but then looks at Stiles again and steps even closer. He leans his head in and deliberately puts his teeth on Stiles' neck, as if to bite, but then retreats without leaving any impression.

Stiles doesn't know how to react. “No, that's — that's not right,” he says finally, shaking his head. Derek doesn't budge, keeps looking at him. “Why are you doing this now? You're not yourself.”

“I am,” replies Derek.

“Yeah, but-” Stiles shakes his head again. “But is it really you?”

Derek doesn't reply, just looks at Stiles.

“Derek, you kept sniffing my neck. And my stomach. Even my hands! You licked my face. You listened in to me when I was-” Stiles cuts himself off and glares at him. “You know what I was doing. And now you're telling me that was you all along? It wasn't. It couldn't have been.”

Stiles wants it to have been. Jesus. How could he want it when Derek was this creepy? But the boundaries weren't clear from the beginning. Pretending to be boyfriends, pretending to be mates, the bite. From Derek's perspective, Stiles must have felt like his real, actual mate. While feral, Derek doesn't know that it's fake. This part of him must have been lost.

But if it isn't now...

No. Stiles isn't convinced. But that's enough; he's already doubting himself, so willing to believe Derek wants him back.

“Even if it's true,” starts Stiles, “this is the worst possible time, Derek. We're at the conference! You were hit with a new, experimental spell, and so was I! And I wouldn't trust Peter not to come here sometime during the night.”

But Derek only leans closer and all the viable reasons aren't as clear as before. “Yes?” he asks.

Stiles licks his lips, suddenly aware of the way Derek's eyes track his tongue. He flushes. “This is a bad idea.”

“Yes?”

Stiles shakes his head. “Don't.”

Derek looks back. "Please?"

Stiles swallows. He doesn't know what he's going to say. He doesn't know how to explain all the reasons to stop this. But in the end, he only needs to say 'no'. He opens his mouth and-

"Yes."

As soon as the sound escapes him, Derek's biting his neck. Immediately, he licks the wound, cleaning the blood that must have appeared. Stiles closes his eyes; he has no wish to see this. Fuck. What is he doing? What will he say to Derek when he comes out of this? But he imagined similar scenarios before. What if they had to do this, what if Derek was under some kind of drug, unaware... It's horrible. Stiles would never do that. But isn't it what he's doing?

It's not. It's obviously not the same.

There are similarities, though.

What the fuck is he doing?

Derek is still shifted so his hands have claws but that doesn't stop him from touching Stiles, his neck, back, and thighs. Stiles was never this excited; he's trembling as he grabs Derek's hair, keeping him close, his other hand fisting his shirt. Derek turns him so he's back to the kitchen counter and suddenly, their groins are brought closer. By now, Stiles has no more thoughts aside from more, closer, faster.

He trails his fingers through Derek's hair and reaches his ear. It's pointy, an odd shape, breaking his focus.

That's how the reality comes crashing back to Stiles. He tenses, his mixed feelings of shock, disbelief that it's happening now, it's happening with Derek, it's happening at all, his arousal-

"No," he says, pushing Derek away. He manages to slide away from Derek and looks at him, his red eyes, visible fangs, barely contained strength.

"Not like this," he says, "not now." He takes another step back, then another.

"Don't," says Derek.

Stiles remembers running away from werewolves only triggers their instinctual need to pursue the prey.

"I just-" he says, pointing to his back. "I'll be right back. We need to calm down and-"

Derek grabs the counter and puts so much strength in his hand that it cracks.

"I thought these buildings were werewolf-proof," mumbles Stiles stupidly. He takes another step back.

"Mate," pleads Derek.

Stiles shakes his head and moves again. "I'm not."

Derek has reached his limit. He snarls and jumps after him but Stiles opens the door to the bathroom at the same time. He barely closes it on time, keeping Derek out.

"I'm here," he says, keeping himself close to the door. "Okay? I'm right here."

Derek growls. He's just on the other side; Stiles can hear him moving.

This is Derek. Or is it? But if it's not Derek, then why does he never think of Derek differently when he's shifted? How can he decide which Derek is real, the one concealing his feelings to Stiles or the one who won't control himself anymore? He doesn't even have magic. But does it mean he would be willing to use magic to check if Derek's feelings are real? That's mind magic. It's fucked up to use mind magic. That's kind of what Jennifer has done and that's why Stiles is in this situation in the first place.

He still feels shaky, both from excitement and the adrenaline. But the danger was never far from excitement for him and even now, when he thinks of Derek, of the power in him, the way he bit Stiles, kept watching after him and jumped-

He's hard. Fuck, this feels so different from when he was full but not aroused. He puts his forehead on the door and says, "I'm going to stay here... And I'll touch myself. Here, where you can only listen to me and smell me, but cannot see or touch me."

It's like walking in on someone, he reasons with himself. If Derek changes his mind later on, they can both pretend it was like realizing someone's masturbating in the shower. (Stiles has caught Scott like this many times; Jackson once; Isaac he's been reasonably sure a few times, Boyd doubting twice. Lydia and Allison never; they make sure to keep this private. But Erica likes to keep it public, announcing what she's going to do and how, and to what effect. Stiles would like to have her confidence, even if it comes from the fact that Derek's bathroom isn't adapted for werewolf hearing).

Still leaning against the door, Stiles reaches down. His hands are trembling so much that he has trouble zipping down his jeans. When he touches himself, still through boxers, he takes in a sharp breath through his teeth. "Fuck," he says. "I wish it was you touching me here."

Derek slams his body against the door. The impact makes Stiles fall away and bite his lip to blood. He leans back against the door, tasting the iron. But it doesn't make him stop; if anything, he's even more eager now.

"I'm so hard," he continues, peeling off his boxers and gasps, touching bare skin. "I wonder, would you be slow and torture me with every movement, every pull? Or would you go fast and rough so I can barely catch a breath? I like both," he adds. "But I'd take anything from you."

There's scratching and a whine.

"You can hear me so well, don't you? You must know exactly what I'm doing. And the smell... Fuck, I have so much precome I don't even need a lube. Can you feel it?"

Stiles touches his balls with his other hand and lets out a breath. “Wish you could touch me,” he says again. “I wish you could lick me, bite me as you did earlier. Would you... Fuck. Would you lick my cock?” Stiles' hand speeds up. “No one's ever given me a blow job. No one's ever done anything like that with me. You'd be the first, the only one-”

Derek growls and Stiles gasps, coming into his hand. He catches his breath and turns, leaning his back against the door.

Well. That's not how it looked with Jackson. Even with Scott, if he'd acknowledge what was happening, he'd only say stuff like, 'Jesus, what's taking you so long? Do you need to watch porn? I can recommend something'.

It was never this engaging. They may be on the other sides of the door, but it was barely separating them. Still, he can't bring himself to really regret what happened. Of course he can't — he wanted this for so long.

Stiles opens his eyes and grimaces at his dirty hands. This didn't help at all, did it? When Derek comes back to his senses, this will be still between them, only spoiling the whole situation, twisting it.

Stiles sighs and goes to wash his hands. He wishes he could just shut off his brain.

Once clean, he rights his clothes and opens the door.

Stiles isn't surprised by the way Derek grabs him and drags out to slam against the wall. What's unexpected is that Derek at once falls to his knees before Stiles and puts his face at his groin. Stiles pulls in the air, his head falling back.

“Oh, fuck,” he manages, his voice already rough as Derek smells his mess through jeans and underwear. Stiles can feel something at his knee and realizes Derek's getting himself off against his leg. “God, you have no idea how many times I imagined this. This and reverse,” says Stiles. “Ano other things. All the combinations, really,” he adds. Derek whines, mouthing at his cock. “Fuck. I can't believe... You're so fucking hot. I'd whine too, I think.”

Derek's movements are already growing erratic.

“You must be close,” continues Stiles. His hands are in Derek's hair; he isn't sure when that happened. “You must still smell my come. Would you want to lick it clean off of me? I'd like that. I could kiss you, taste myself from you, lick your come and-”

Derek whines again, tensing, then relaxing. Stiles has never been this turned on, again, and now he's not even erect.

His head falls back against the wall and he looks out of the window; it's not snowing anymore. Now that his pulse is slowing down, he realizes how tired he is. “Come on,” he says to Derek and lets him up. But when Derek leans closer, Stiles twists away. “We should go to sleep. With time the effect of the spell should fade and you should be able to shift back.”

Derek follows after him to bed but lies on the side, looking at him. He reaches for Stiles' hand and pulls it so that it's between them, watching the mark. "This is going to be such a mess if you remember all this," says Stiles. "Although it'll be a mess if you forget it too," he adds with a sigh, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling. But once his eyes close, he falls asleep with ease.

* * *

Stiles wakes up and reacts on instinct, turning and grabbing what was about to go into his stomach without thinking.

It's a broom. Stiles looks up to see that the other end is held by Peter. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Waking you up," says Peter. "We're leaving."

"What?" Stiles sits up, stirring Derek, who is holding him in sleep. He looks out of the window; the sun is up. They must've slept for longer than normal.

Then, Stiles snaps his head back to Derek. "He's human!" he says to Peter. "He shifted back in sleep."

"Good, I don't need it, then," mutters Peter, putting the broom away. "Now get up. You're driving."

"What about the conference?"

"It's over."

Stiles stares at him, bad feeling rising. "Have you been representing our pack alone?"

"Yes," says Peter. "Everyone feels so bad for the attack on Derek and his suffering from unknown spells. Some are sorry even for you," he adds. "It's the best talk we've had in years."

"Wha — oh, never mind," mutters Stiles, rubbing his face. "Let's get out of here. Derek? We're going back home."

Derek opens his eyes; they look at each other for a beat.

"I've had less awkward mornings after with people I've known for less than five minutes," says Peter.

"What?" says Stiles, finally averting his eyes. "I'll take the bathroom first."

"What happened here?" asks Peter, pointing at the cracked kitchen counter.

Stiles' mind supplies the memories instead of what to say. "Oh," he manages. "Nothing."

Peter raises his eyebrows. "Very convincing."

“No, it's not what you...” Stiles trails off because it's probably very similar to whatever Peter is imagining. He groans and goes to the bathroom.

In the mirror, he can clearly see the marks Derek's given him: on his neck, wrist, and hip. He'll never hear the end of it from the pack. God, he'll never hear the end of it from Peter.

Stiles finishes cleaning up and leaves the bathroom, almost walking into Derek. “Oh, sor-”

“Stiles,” says Derek quietly, still standing closer than necessary. “I remember everything.”

“And I hear everything,” calls Peter from his room.

“Fuck off, Peter,” replies Stiles.

Derek sways even closer but Stiles tenses, unsure what happens between them now.

“Sorry,” says Derek, his eyes dark. “I can see my marks on you and — I usually have better control.”

“But you're back,” says Stiles. “It's you now, not the spell.”

“It's been me all this time,” replies Derek. “The spell only took my control.”

“Mind-blowing,” comments Peter, passing them on the way to the kitchen.

“Shut up,” mutters Stiles, not taking his eyes off Derek. “So-”

“I love you,” says Derek. He seems startled at the words himself. “I-”

“I love you too,” says Stiles before he can backtrack.

“Oh, finally,” mutters Peter, now going back to his room. “Hurry this up, would you? You can finish in the car.”

Stiles would reply but this time, he has a better and more important thing to do; he's kissing Derek.

He doesn't know how much time passes before Peter appears again. “Well, I'm putting my stuff in the car and if you're still not ready when I come back, I'm driving myself.”

This Stiles cannot ignore. “No, you're not! Jesus, why do you want to leave so badly?” He pauses. “Peter. Who did you piss off again?”

“No one.”

“Come on, Derek won't be angry.”

“Just disappointed,” says Derek.

“Yeah. But I'll be livid,” says Stiles. “Well?”

“No one,” repeats Peter with a grimace. “I have enough of this pathetic show and the people in here.”

“You sure had fun while it lasted, though,” says Stiles.

“I did,” agrees Peter. “By the way, the notes on werewolf history are here.”

Stiles takes them in silence. There always comes a time when he just doesn't have anything more to say to Peter.

Derek leans closer to him for the last kiss. “I love your smell.”

Peter reopens the door. “And I would love driving your car, Stiles.”

“Okay, okay! We're going to pack now.”

Once in the car, Stiles drives them to leave the keys at the reception but Peter says he'll go inside by himself.

Stiles narrows his gaze. “Fine, but you're explaining everything once you come back.”

Peter rolls his eyes and leaves. He doesn't take long but when back in the car, he hurries Stiles again.

Stiles obediently starts driving. “Well?”

“I'll talk when we leave the grounds.”

“You're freaking me out,” says Stiles. When they're passing the gate he meets Peter's eyes in the mirror and repeats, “Well?”

“As I said, everyone thinks you were gravely injured and aren't a threat anymore so they started to pity our pack. I've received some invitations for meetings, exchange of knowledge and such.”

“How gravely injured?” asks Stiles, already fearing the answer.

Peter sighs. “They think that it's a miracle that you're alive. As for Derek, he's thought to be still feral, maybe to the end of his days.”

“And you've done nothing to correct them,” realizes Stiles.

“It's in our interest that they believe this.”

“They'll learn the truth at the next conference anyway,” says Derek.

“That's in five years,” says Peter with a shrug.

Stiles looks up at him. “So that's why you wanted us to leave quickly.”

Peter takes out his mobile. “Yes, in part.”

“What's the other part?”

Peter sighs. “Do you know why I've been with so many people?”

“Because werewolves are all for sexual liberation and you know how to take advantage of that?”

Peter smiles but it doesn't reach his eyes. “To be considered an alpha one needs a mate. I've always known I wanted to be an alpha so I was searching for mine. But never mind how many new people I would meet throughout the years, no one would grab my attention. Worse, I felt nothing.”

Stiles frowns. “As in, you're aromantic?”

Peter raises his eyebrows. “And you've read up on queer labels.”

“Never mind,” says Stiles. “Continue.”

“It's tiring, hearing from everyone how important mates are. It's frustrating because it's not even true.”

Stiles only now realizes how people reacted to the news of Derek having a mate, how many there were seminars about mates.

“But Chris is kind of your mate,” he notices.

“I'm not an alpha so no, he's not.”

“But you're together, right?”

Peter hums, taking out his phone.

“Oh, I understand,” says Stiles. “You probably have some kind of queerplatonic relationship going on.”

“You sure dived deeply into queer things,” comments Peter. “Did you find something for yourself?”

“Fine, I'm shutting up,” says Stiles. “Derek, I've been meaning to ask you — why did you say that you don't like biting?”

Derek stares at him. “You're asking about it now?”

“Don't mind me,” says Peter with a smile.

“No, you're right, never mind.”

“He was telling the truth then,” says Peter.

Stiles can't help glancing at Derek, who sighs. “There are different meanings to biting.”

Stiles realizes what he means after a second. It was true that Derek doesn't like biting as a mean of turning a human into a werewolf; he may like other biting. Stiles remembers suddenly the bites he received yesterday and flushes.

He sighs and finds a more comfortable position in his seat. "I'm glad this Three Oceans shit is over. Although we've never learned who poisoned Derek and left us the note."

"Ah, it was Kali," says Peter. "When she heard that I was coming to the conference, she used Jennifer's mountain ash to leave us the note and yellow wolfsbane to poison me. She was jealous of our past relationship."

"Are they going to be punished then?"

"Anna said that the organizers figured we can solve it between ourselves."

Stiles raises his eyebrows. "They really don't give a fuck about us. No one asked about Derek even though he was poisoned. And how are we going to solve it between ourselves?"

"Jennifer said she'll come by once or twice to practice magic with you and cleanse Nemeton."

"Peter, that's — that's great," says Stiles, astonished. "Although I'm pretty sure you could have negotiated for more than one or two visits."

"Jennifer was healing your wounds back then so my position wasn't very strong."

"Okay, that's fair. Did Jennifer break up with Kali at least? What she did is a huge red flag."

"No," says Peter with a grimace. "When Jennifer heard how possessive Kali is, they started kissing. Honestly, I don't understand them either. They met thanks to me and they grew closer thanks to criticizing me."

"So in the end, it was all your fault," Derek sums up.

"Right? What a stupid case. And I couldn't even solve it," complains Stiles.

"We were both hurt at the time."

"Yeah. And anyway, we passed that time better."

They share a smile when Peter says, "I believe that seeing Derek feral back in the cafeteria, not letting anyone approach you, Stiles, licking you everywhere really convinced people that you two are mates. So in the end, I helped more than I frankly thought possible."

Stiles rests his head on his palm, elbow braced against the car door. "Oh my god."

"Actually, was there anything unusual after you woke up, Stiles?"

Stiles looks up at him. "You knew."

"Priapism happens if you come into contact with a lot of werewolf saliva."

“And you forgot to mention that?”

“Yes,” says Peter without a shade of guilt.

Derek frowns. “What's a priapism? What happened?”

Neither Stiles nor Peter answer at first.

“The name comes from the Greek god of fertility, Priapus,” starts Stiles haltingly. “And his representations, you know, the way people draw him...”

“It's when your penis is erect for hours,” says Peter.

Derek turns to Stiles.

“It's fine now,” mutters Stiles. “I'm not sure how much time passed yesterday when I was like that. Over two hours for sure. Yeah, a weird feeling.” He smiles, stupidly happy again. “But in the end, I got a boyfriend.”

“So you're willing to come back next time,” says Peter.

The smile disappears from Stiles' face. “We still have time,” he says instead. “We need to meet with the Jimenez, the Moorehead, and other packs first.”

“Don't remind me,” says Derek with a grimace, but then suddenly brightens. “Although I won't be able to attend these. I'm feral.”

“You're the alpha.”

“I'm feral.”

Stiles pauses. “You can't just-”

“I'm feral.”

Stiles looks up again. “Peter, say something to him.”

“It's your boyfriend, not mine.”

Stiles narrows his eyes. “You won't derail me with happy news. Deal with it because it's your fault.”

Peter shrugs. “I'm not interested in these meetings anyway.”

“You're both terrible.” Stiles looks at Derek. “Please?”

“As if that'll work,” scoffs Peter. “Derek hates people.”

Derek looks at Stiles.

"I'm offering benefits," adds Stiles. "Full package." Then an idea strikes him and he puts his hand on Derek's arm, looks at him, showing off his neck, and says, "Please, alph-"

"Okay." Derek's eyes are zeroed in on his neck; Stiles stares at him, feeling hot.

"I'm more than happy to replace you and drive, Stiles," says Peter mildly.

Stiles immediately turns to look ahead, taking his hand back.

Derek blinks and looks ahead as well. "Okay," he says. "But you'll be there too, Peter."

Stiles beams. "In five years as well?"

"Aside from the mealtimes and seminars, I had a good time at the conference," admits Derek. "If it's with you, I'll go."

"I would say something about enjoying the conference aside from the conference but honestly, I feel the same," says Stiles. They exchange smiles again.

"Hm," says Peter.

The smile dies on Stiles' face once again.

"What," says Derek.

Peter looks up from his mobile. "The rest of the pack disbelieves that it's thanks to me you're finally together."

Stiles gasps. "You told them?"

Derek glances at him. "Was he not supposed to?"

"They heard from him," says Stiles, crestfallen. "Scott heard from him instead of me. I was so busy earlier I forgot, and now I can't because I'm driving. Derek, you need to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"The truth!"

"About?"

"About us!"

"So I should write that we only got together because I was feral and you were trapped with me?"

Stiles scrunches his eyebrows. "Maybe just start with the fact that we're together but not thanks to Peter. We're together despite his tampering, information concealment, and giving false statements."

Derek nods, already texting. "You're a terrible person, Peter."

This time, Peter only smiles, already engaged in the information warfare.

Stiles still isn't sure of his place — with Derek and within the pack, as a spark, emissary, alpha mate. He doesn't know what their pack's place is in the supernatural world. There's still a dark matter between them, undefined, undiscovered, unclear. But now, Stiles knows they're together in it; him and Derek, and the rest of the pack. They can come through.

End Notes

Warnings for canon-level violence, a bit of blood, prejudice in the supernatural world, and temporary priapism (medical condition).

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